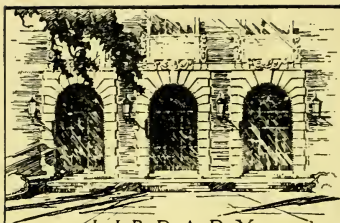


All For Naught
by
Wilfred Woollam M.A.




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ALL FOR NAUGHT.

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ALL FOR NAUGHT

BY

WILFRED WOOLLAM, M.A.

‘Am I mad that I should cherish that which bears but bitter fruit?
I will pluck it from my bosom, though my heart be at the root.’

TENNYSON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

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ALL FOR NAUGHT.

PROLOGUE.



GREAT trial was just over.

The heavy door of the cell which, quarter-of-an-hour ago, had closed on its new occupant, opened to allow Henry Oldfield to pass out.

His sojourn there had been very brief. His conversation with the convict extended only to a few words ; but, when that door closed once more, it was with a clang that jarred then on every fibre of his being,

and reverberated in his memory till the day of his death.

Henry Oldfield was a man in middle life, of robust frame, handsome features, and, until now, of erect and dignified carriage. Some people called him proud. As he now hurried through the drizzling rain in the murky twilight of that November afternoon, few people would have called him dignified, and none proud.

Terror as well as disgrace marked his every movement. His shambling, unsteady gait almost became a run. He staggered along heedless of the passers-by, —some of whom turned round to look after him,—and heedless of the rain, which drenched his white drawn face.

His lips were set in a rigid, reflective mould; but once he scowled in such a way

that the ragged, bare-legged urchin, who was offering him a paper, recoiled from him in fear of a cuff.

‘He ’as happen bin in it ’isself, Joa,’ said the mercantile arab to a young coadjutor, with much sagacity; and then he howled after the retreating figure, by way of revenge: ‘Great trial this day! Sensation in court! The verdict! *Evening Budget!* Third edition!’

Very soon, Mr. Oldfield reached his destination, a grim-looking house with ‘apartments’ over the door, only distinguishable from fifty other high, grim houses in a dingy square, by the number.

He looked up at the window, and then the expression of his face changed. A passing resemblance to his old self flitted cross his face, and asserted itself in his

carriage. His brow relaxed. His head rose. A momentary calmness fell upon him like a soft shadow on a sterile rock. He seemed another man.

In the same second in which he touched the rapper, the door opened, and the man who passed its portal might still look—as indeed he was—wretched, hunted, hopeless, but not a suspect, not a criminal in any light there.

Yes! the door had opened as soon as Mr. Oldfield reached it; and, e'er it closed again, the quick eyes of a passer-by might have caught the vision of a beautiful woman, with her arms stretched out to the man she loved.

Thus for a moment she was seen, or might have been seen, looking up with earnest, anxious eyes, and a smile trembling

at its own boldness, into that haggard, but now tender face. Then the door was shut, and they were alone.

‘ Oh, Henry, it’s over, I know it’s over, and here you are—safe—safe and in my arms once more. Thank God—thank God !’

‘ Yes, it’s all over, and I am here safe—for the moment ; but, oh, Mary, how can I tell you ? I must leave England to-night, I must fly this hour—I must leave you and the children until—until—oh, God, that it’s come to this !’

A great sob, and one bitter cry : ‘ To-night,’ was the only answer.

‘ Oh, my love !’ gasped that strong man, as he kissed the now white, silent face pressed against his breast, ‘ speak—do speak—if it’s only to rebuke me. Why don’t you blame me ?’

‘No, no, I shall never blame you, Henry, never! I know it was *not* your fault. But to-night, and the children, Henry, what can I tell them?—to-night! this hour! after all our hopes—oh, it cannot!—Henry, are you there?—I don’t see you—hold me—am I fainting?’

‘Darling, I *am* holding you—don’t faint—Mary—oh, my God!’

‘I am better, Henry—kiss me—kiss me, and then tell me just what I’m to do—I will help you to bear it—I will bear my half!’

An hour later, Henry Oldfield went out into the night. A cab was waiting for him at the gate. As he took his seat in it, a ragged boy put his face in at the window and said :

‘The verdict, sir, will you buy one?’

Then he fell back, frightened. The gentleman inside had savagely pushed him away. The cabman laughed, and the vehicle with its grim fugitive rolled away.



PART I.



CHAPTER I.

A NEW RELATION.



GEORGE OLDFIELD was nine years old when his mother died, and Bell was ten. The children remembered her death very distinctly ; but of the years previous to that time, their dreams were very vague.

In after years, George used to wonder if he had ever been told by anyone that his father was dead. He seemed to think not. But of this he was certain : one parent's love had been so abundant, neither he nor

his sister had ever sighed for the love of another.

In a comfortable semi-detached house in the suburbs of a pretty country town, after an illness of a few weeks, attended by her sister Elsie, who greatly loved her, Mrs. Oldfield died; and that day was the only day that George could distinguish in his memory from those many quiet days when his mother was ill, and Bell and he used to take each other's shoes off (a precaution of their own suggestion) whenever they went upstairs, so as not to wake 'nud.'

George and Bell both called their mother 'nud'—a word which always remained to them a sacred and lovely word, linking them to life's dimmest memories,—the days before they could say 'mother.'

George remembered being fetched home from school—he remembered that last embrace—the cold kiss of those dying lips—that last long loving gaze into his stained swollen face, then he was snatched away.

He knew ‘nud’ was dying; but he hardly knew what ‘dying’ meant. He saw Aunt Elsie kneeling by the bed with her hands clasped, crying as he had never seen anyone grown-up cry before.

For himself and Bell! they were crying at intervals through that long day, mostly in each other’s arms, till at last they were found thus locked together both fast asleep.

He took hold of Bell’s hand, going upstairs to bed, and comforted her with the assurance that he would soon be a man

and would always be kind to her as 'nud' had told him.

So Mrs. Oldfield died and was buried! George and Bell, for the first time, knew the taste of human agony, and, having tasted it, forgot it. Life, which to children means joy, began again for them in a new home with Aunt Elsie.

They had begun again to 'keep house' in a new garden, to swing on a new swing, scramble over new walls, and forget at times altogether that their torn clothes were new black clothes, when Aunt Elsie met them one morning, a letter in her hand, with a very wonderful and bewildering piece of news.

'My dears, your father is coming home from a long way off. I suppose you hardly remember him? He loves you

very much, and he wants you to live with him.' Then this kind woman, perhaps resenting in anticipation their forgetfulness of herself, asked, with a look of deprecation: 'Shall you like to go?'

Upon this, both the children, who, at the first announcement had stared blankly, began to cry as if there were going to be another funeral, and said 'No!'

'I didn't know we had a father,' sobbed Bell; and George echoed stoutly, 'Father is dead!'

'My dears,' replied Aunt Elsie, 'your father has come from a long way off to take care of you.'

'Why didn't he take care of "nud"?' asked Bell; and George followed up with an assurance—the mingled first-fruits of

his aunt's kindness and her catechetical instruction in Scripture, which she taught in a different way from her sister—that their Heavenly Father and she together could take care of them well enough!

Aunt Elsie smiled and shook her head, half reprovngly, at these questionings and objections. She said 'Fie!' with up-lifted finger, but she was not displeased that the advent of a father awakened no filial flutterings in those little breasts.

Why should she be? But, never mind! that question might involve the opening of a problem only beautiful to metaphysicians.

She loved them, dear soul! They had begun to cling to her. She had never before had anything clinging to her in that way, and the tearing away of many

cares is like the tearing away of ivy from a wall.

She was not displeased at this filial apathy; but she was a good woman, and her conscience—or what she thought conscience—being at war with her feelings, she very soon had George and Bell crying heartily for not wanting to see their father.

‘Yes, my dears,’ proceeded Aunt Elsie, after the field was won, ‘your newly-found father is a good and noble man. It was he that fed and clothed you when you lived with your dear mother. You will understand, some day, why he was not able to live with you as other fathers live with their children. His duties kept him abroad—but you don’t know anything about duties yet, dears, do you?’

‘Yes, Aunt Elsie,’ George answered, with great promptness. ‘I must do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me.’

‘What a dear boy you are!’ Aunt Elsie exclaimed, ‘and your father will grow very fond of you. He will love you both very much, and you will both love him. You will live in a nice house—much nicer than this—and have expensive toys and very pretty clothes, and you won’t quite forget your Aunt Elsie, will you?’

Here Bell began to cry again, but George mutinied. He had cried as much as he fairly could at one spell, so he kissed his aunt instead. Then he took his dirty handkerchief, which he had lately used, in the capacity of butler, for wiping the doll’s tea-things. The tea was

a mixture of mud and water, compounded solely with a regard to colour. This handkerchief he dabbed consolingly in Bell's face while she went on sobbing less and less audibly, until she caught sight of the handkerchief and her brother's face, which had also been copiously besmirched in a similar way, and then she laughed.

And then George led her away triumphantly to their bower of bliss at the bottom of their new garden. This was an elder-tree, with an old kitchen chair hidden in its foliage, which did duty for a Jonah's gourd, an enchanted palace, and a back-kitchen, as the days of the week and the exigencies of the hour required.

We talk about the helplessness of the young—verily, humanity is never so efflo-

resent in its independence as in childhood.

A month later the children found themselves quite at home with their new father at the Elms. The Elms was an ivy-porched, old-fashioned, roomy house on the Leeds Road, two miles from the big smoke-wrapped town of Filesfield.

It had a great look of comfort and seclusion about its narrow, ivy-beaten windows, its low, tiled roof and old-fashioned chimney stacks. Many a Filesfield magnate glanced enviously from his high stanhope phaeton over the moss-crusted garden wall,—across the turf which had been turf for sixty years—since those huge branched elms were saplings,—and wondered who lived there—wondered, it may be, who was that sweet agile child laugh-

ing and leaning out of the sun-steeped window, with a pair of scissors in her hand, and pelting a gentleman on the walk with the flowers she was clipping in the window boxes.

From the first moment when Bell saw her new father, she loved him. She walked without knocking, without an inquiry, straight into his heart, as if it had been an open door, waiting open for her; and he shut it upon her directly and kept her there as a prisoner sentenced for life. George loved his father too, but not in this way—perhaps because he was a boy.

Now these children had been solemnly enjoined by Aunt Elsie never to ask their father why he had not lived with their mother and them in the past; and of course, as soon as ever they were all happily set-

tled at the Elms, they began, with all their might, to want to know. They had never given the question a thought before, but Aunt Elsie (very unserpentlike) had shown them a tree of knowledge ; and they soon determined to taste the fruit.

It was on a great occasion: Bell's biggest doll had just been married. The banquet was spread, and—so far as the ingredients of the viands would allow—demolished. The bride had departed, in a perambulator, ten minutes since to the back of the arbour. Mr. Oldfield was asleep within—a piece of bride's cake in one hand and the daily paper in the other.

Bell, tittering in the doorway, seemed inclined to turn stealthily back, but George blocked the way. Pulling at her frock more and more vigorously, each time with

an accompanying gesture of impatience, as if it were a bell that would not ring, he kept repeating,

‘Ask him! Ask him!’

After each exertion, while waiting for the effect, he appeased his impatience by nibbling the hair off the head of one of the bridesmaids, and squeezing her waist, in a manner which certainly suggested distraction, if not love.

At last the desired effect was gained. Between Bell’s tittering and George’s promptings, not inaudible, Mr. Oldfield woke; and the absorbing riddle was propounded. It was disposed of, that time, in a way which made it unlikely that it would be asked again for some time.

‘My dear little Bell,’ said her father finally, after laughing at her and teasing

her for some minutes. 'I was *not* a prisoner in a giant's castle, nor was I with David Livingstone, lost in Africa. I was earning money,—you at least, George, know what money is?'

George instinctively felt in his pocket; but, only bringing out a piece of string, contented himself by nodding his head and glancing at the disarranged wedding breakfast, which had cost him twopence halfpenny.

'And to make money,' continued Mr. Oldfield, 'I had to live abroad. So you see, I could not possibly live with you and "nud" as many fathers could have done. But I always sent you everything you were in need of. Some day, when you are older, I will tell you many things which you could not understand now.'

Mother loved me and I loved her—as much as you and George, Bell, love each other. It nearly killed me to think I was so far away when she died. You were both always very happy in those days, weren't you?' continued Mr. Oldfield.

'Yes, father.'

'And "nud" was happy?'

'Yes,' said Bell, 'she always said so—often—and oh,' she added, with a tremor now in her sweet, pure voice, 'so very, very good!'

'And you had everything you wanted?'

'Yes,' answered George, now averting his face and intercepting one of Bell's hands which was going up to her eyes.

Bell yielded it up to be squeezed, and perceived nothing ludicrous in the fact that George's other hand was tightening

more and more convulsively round that unfortunate bridesmaid's waist, till it seemed likely she would never be able to sit on a chair again.

‘Yes, you had everything you wanted, I know, and so you shall have,’ concluded Mr. Oldfield. ‘And now kiss me, both of you, and be off. Be good children, and your old father will never leave you again.’

They ran off, their grief vanishing; but George looked back and saw that his father's face was troubled, and he also heard him sigh heavily. The child's face again fell. Mr. Oldfield caught the reflected sorrow in the little boy's face, and he rose quickly from the arbour-bench and chased the little fellow with a laugh—a laugh which seemed merry, and which

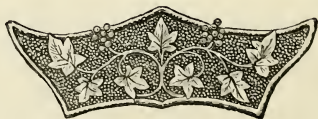
George doubtless thought was so. George did not know then that grown-up people pretend to laugh in the parts they play, just as often as little children in *their* acting pretend to cry.

So the days passed away at the Elms for George and Bell, just as they would pass for any other little boy and girl devotedly fond of each other, with a pleasant home, a kind father, a conscientious governess, and a middle-aged, matronly housekeeper.

But they did not pass with Mr. Oldfield just as they would pass with most other gentlemen with such surroundings—far from it. The children's little friends he was always glad to see ; but friends of his own he had none. He read the papers, he read books, he rode and walked in the

country alone, he went into the town alone. He was a very lonely man.

In due time George was sent to school—a boarding-school. Bell never went to a school of any kind. She had the governess for a companion, and her own younger friends—heaps of them. George too had his friends, Ned Wyndham, a neighbouring doctor's son, his earliest and dearest, and others whom he brought home to spend long parts of a summer holiday. There was nothing singular about this home. No one ever said anything worse than that Mr. Oldfield led a very secluded life, as indeed he did.





CHAPTER II.

AN INCIDENT AND AN ACCIDENT.

WHEN Isabel Oldfield was about fourteen years old, an incident happened which she had cause to remember for a very long time. This incident, trifling enough, might have been forgotten, but for something more impressive which directly followed it.

She had been with her father to an afternoon performance of 'Patience.' It was pleasant spring weather, and they were walking home at a brisk pace, Bell volubly

discussing the merits of the opera, and Mr. Oldfield listening, or seeming to listen—a dissimulation he was rather clever in—to her animated remarks. The streets were noticeably quiet, for it was a quiet time—about five o'clock; and Bell, transferring her interest for a moment from the costumes of 'Patience' to those in a shop-window—a corner shop—had allowed Mr. Oldfield to get a few steps in advance.

When she turned away from the window to rejoin him, she found he was much nearer to her than she expected. He was only half-a-dozen yards in advance, standing with his back to her and looking intently—evidently in astonishment—at two persons walking before him.

Bell touched his arm, but for a second he did not heed her—he seemed to have

forgotten her. Glancing from his face, worked up into a very troubled expression, Bell thought, at so ordinary a spectacle, she could discern nothing to explain it. She only saw the backs of two persons slowly walking away from them. The two persons were a rather stout gentleman—she believed him to be a clergyman—and a well-proportioned, smartly-attired young man. That, indeed, was all Mr. Oldfield had seen, just as he turned the corner when Bell detached herself at the shop-window ; but that sight had been enough to arrest his steps instantaneously, and set him thinking altogether new thoughts, which seemed to be conflicting thoughts, and required some immediate decision. The decision came with Bell's touch on his arm.

‘Bell, my dear, I shall have to leave you. I’ve some little business to attend to, which I had quite forgotten. Those gentlemen brought it to my mind. Let me see now, can you catch the ’bus?’

So saying, Mr. Oldfield looked at his watch, seeming to be much divided in his attention between Bell’s movements and his own.

‘The five o’clock ’bus has gone; but which way are you going, papa? You are not going back, are you?’

‘No, I’m going—— But see, here’s a cab! If it’s not engaged, you shall take it. You ought to drive home from the theatre. It’s the proper thing— isn’t it, Bell? And then, by the way, you can go up to Church Street and call for those plants. Capital!’

Meanwhile, Bell was laughing, perhaps a little puzzled, and Mr. Oldfield was holding his stick up, as a signal to the cabman, laughing too, as a man laughs at something he is supposed to laugh at, but has hardly noticed.

The cab, unoccupied, drove up to the curbstone, and Mr. Oldfield had opened the door and shut it again, with Bell inside, given directions with half-a-crown, nodded at the window, and seen the vehicle move off, before he began to reflect that the cabman's face was uncommonly weather-stained, or stained by something else than weather. He seemed to remember now, moreover, that the cabman's profuse, 'Thank yer honours,' for the fee, had a somewhat guttural, not to say inebriate, inflection.

‘Bah!’ said Mr. Oldfield. ‘He’s perfectly sober, and driving as well as any man could.’

The latter of these reassuring reflections was perfectly true, but the former was not, as events proved.

In a few minutes Mr. Oldfield overtook the two gentlemen. They were talking earnestly, but not excitedly. They did not notice Mr. Oldfield’s approach until he put his hand on the stout clergyman’s shoulder.

It was not a jovial action, on the contrary rather grave, but friendly.

‘What are you doing in Filesfield, Mr. Sharely?’

At the first sound of Mr. Oldfield’s voice, both men stopped. Mr. Sharely, the elder

of the men, started, and for a moment or less than that time looked confused. Then he smiled—an affable, bland, even a radiant smile.

The younger man, whom Mr Oldfield accosted in an easy and familiar way, did not betray the slightest surprise or emotion of any kind. He turned round on hearing Mr. Oldfield's voice, as a turnstile might turn round, with mechanical ease; and held his hand out, while a slightly amused smile played under his long drooping moustache.

Mr. Oldfield shook hands with him, merely saying, 'How d'y'do, Maurice?' with all his attention still directed to the clergyman.

That gentleman, regaining his composure,

and with it a great influx of good-humour, as it seemed, exclaimed, in answer to Mr. Oldfield's question,

‘Now who would have thought of this, Oldfield? Talk about his satanic majesty, eh? and he forthwith slaps you on the back. You're the very man I have come to see.’

‘Oh!’ said Mr. Oldfield, evidently not delighted at the communication, but with a smile, ‘you are always kind. It's a pity I can't say I'm charmed to see you. Now, if you had not said you had *come* to see me, I should have been glad, as you very well know.’

‘Yes, yes, I know, Oldfield. It's a case of “art thou that my lord Elijah?” I'm always troubling Israel. Eh! Well, you're right; but you'll get over this. It's a trifle, ha! ha!’ and the stout, rather

diminutive, merry-faced cleric smiled, and beamed, and almost winked, as he turned his eyes a great deal and his face a little towards the young man at his side.

Mr. Oldfield understood him; but he said nothing for some little time; and then asked, in a very casual tone,

‘How is business, Maurice?’

‘Rather slack,’ replied Maurice, without evincing any trouble in that circumstance, and without any sign—unless it were in that faintest of smiles under the heaviest of moustaches—that he had understood or even heard the foregoing words of his companion.

‘Humph!’ said Mr. Oldfield.

Hereupon his clerical acquaintance smiled again, this time, however, with some slight uncertainty as to its reception. Then he

coughed, looked critically at the imperturbable young man by his side, and then straight into Mr. Oldfield's eyes with a look that said plainly, 'I'm proud of him.'

'You know, Oldfield, my business is to visit the sick and look after the needy.' Mr. Oldfield's brow darkened ominously; but the clergyman continued, 'The needs of my boy, *they* have brought me to Filesfield.'

Mr. Oldfield groaned and looked askance at the 'boy' thus plainly indicated, who looked back at him with his old, pleasant, slightly supercilious smile.

'Am I never to be free, Sharely? Will you and Maurice never stop till I'm ruined? Do you take a pleasure in keeping me on the rack? What is it this

time? I thought the last arrangement was to be final.'

'Well,' said Mr. Sharely, his face lighting up with sympathy and benevolence, or seeming to do so, 'this *will* be the last time—the very last, won't it, Maurice?'

Maurice simply said 'Yes.'

'Well, what is it?' asked Mr. Oldfield.

'Two thousand pounds,' replied Mr. Sharely, 'we want to borrow two thousand pounds.'

Mr. Oldfield closed his lips, and closed his hands—*both* hands—with an expression which plainly implied he thus closed his pockets, and curtly remarked,

'Not from me.'

At this the clergyman laughed—a laugh seemed his favourite refuge in awkward pauses. Maurice looked obliquely at the

pavement through half-closed eyes, and with his stick struck at an imaginary piece of gravel, and said, in a flute-like voice,

‘Just as you think best.’

‘No,’ said Mr. Oldfield, ‘you may drive me out of Filesfield!--and you may keep me on the rack till I die!—but another two thousand pounds, never!—never!’

During this conversation the three men had been walking on, without any consultation as to direction, in Mr. Oldfield’s way home; but they were still barely out of the heart of the town.

Now when he repeated for the third time “never!” after long intervals, unbroken by either of his companions—who had kept silence, each in his own distinctive manner,—Mr. Sharely asked, with another smile,

‘ Well ! where are we going ? ’

This question brought them to a standstill, when Mr. Sharely’s ‘ boy ’ suggested :

‘ Will you come to my rooms ? ’

‘ By all means,’ said the clergyman, promptly ; and Mr. Oldfield took out his watch, and hesitated to give an answer.

As they thus paused, they were roused by a stir behind them—then they saw people rushing together, and heard a woman’s shriek. The commotion and the explanation came in the same second. The young man, whom both the others had addressed as ‘ Maurice,’ took in the whole situation first.

‘ In here ! In here ! ’ he said, laying his hand forcibly on Mr. Oldfield’s arm. ‘ It’s a horse running away ! ’

Coming round a wide curve in the road, which was very broad, the vehicle shot past them almost as soon as they saw it. Maurice's quiet eyes never moved as he said coolly, pulling his moustache,

‘ By heavens !—that's pace !—no driver—she'll be on the causeway !’

But one of his companions, at least, did not hear him. Mr. Oldfield for a moment stood as one palsied, with stony, wild-staring eyes. He had caught a glimpse of some red geraniums on the roof of the cab ; and instinct rather than reason had filled in all other details in the horrible picture that flashed across his mind.

With one feeble cry, he plunged into the helter-skelter crowd in the wake of the vanishing cab.

‘ What is it ? who is it ? did you see ?’ said

the quiet-eyed young man, who had caught the distracted look on Mr. Oldfield's face, and was at his side in the same second, hurling some unfortunate pursuer, who stood in his way, to the ground.

‘Bell! Bell!’ was the answer. ‘Oh, my God!’

‘*Your child?*’ asked Maurice, his habitually light, cynical expression fading away. His face grew sad and stern, the colour in his olive cheeks grew deep; and for a moment that handsome face seemed made of bronze, as he sprang forward, and gained the van of the headlong rabble! But what could he do?—the cab gained on him in every yard, and even if he could have overtaken it, what then? Some daring impetuous men *do* stop runaway horses, even when encumbered with

vehicles ; but how they do it, is a miracle to everybody—not least to themselves, when they think of it afterwards !

So some of these unquenchably gallant spirits in corduroy were converging now from advanced positions towards the horse's head ; but they either missed their moment, or shrank back at the last second, and were left behind ! In less time than it takes to tell it, the flying vehicle, approaching nearer and nearer to the curbstone, had left Maurice hopelessly in the rear. But still he did not slacken his pace, and his eyes never moved from the whirling cab as it neared its doom.

He saw that doom come much in the way that he had so coolly foretold ; and then for a moment those motionless eyes of his *did* quiver with horror.

It seemed for an instant, as if some trembling, shrieking creatures, who had stepped out from a shop-door, and stood paralysed on the pavement, must be trampled to death ; but they were not !

The front off-wheel, dithering and revolving off the ground, was dashed against a lamp-post, and the crashing of glass with the shrieks accompanying it were as if a conservatory crowded with people had been shattered at one blow. A second elapsed ; then the lamp-post fell, amid some of the débris, with another distinct pitiless crash, and, after that, one faint treble wail of anguish, outliving the crash and tumult of horror, now pierced the air and chilled the soul, like the cry of a dying child.

At the first thud, before the lamp-post fell, the horse had freed itself and was

gone. The body of the coach lay on its side unbroken by the falling iron pillar, which had only grazed it.

A dozen faces were peering in through the broken glass—a dozen arms were outstretched—the door, what was left of it, was wrenched open, and rough, kind voices were heard in chaotic council; but nothing definite was known or done before Maurice, with words and gestures that melted a path for him through the crowd, found himself heading the rescue.

All eyes followed him. Everyone seemed ready to obey his orders; and when he put out his slim but sinewy arms, and lifted up the seemingly senseless girl, as if she were a very little child, a voice was heard among the clamour of tongues:

‘Her father! poor man. Is she dead?’

Bell was not dead, nor anything like it ; she began to speak, and raised her head, before Maurice—hemmed in by a hundred faces—had reached the shop into which he was carrying her.

Just at this moment Mr. Oldfield arrived, trembling with terror, and only able to ejaculate single words for want of breath.

‘ Thank—God !—thank—God !—Bell ! Bell ! not killed—is it serious ?’

‘ Oh, papa !’ she cried, the colour again coming into her face. ‘ I don’t think—I can’t feel—I believe I’m not hurt at all—not much !’

‘ Oh ! my darling, can you stand ?’

At this suggestion, Maurice very gently allowed the young lady’s dainty feet, which had been somewhat freely exposed to

admiration, to touch the ground, upon which she showed her ability not only to stand on them, but, at Mr. Oldfield's pathetic injunction, to move about with considerable alacrity.

‘God bless you, Maurice,’ cried Mr. Oldfield. ‘God bless you for a brave man. Bell, swing your arms—move them this way. Oh, my child, there has been a miracle!—you are not hurt a bit. Aren't you cut anywhere with the glass?’

Bell—who was now laughing and crying together, from the strain on her nerves and the ludicrous reflections consequent on the gymnastic exercises she had to perform in public—now protested with some fervour that she was not even scratched.

‘I—I've only just bumped my head, and knocked my elbow. Oh! papa, I hope

I wasn't a great coward—I thought I should be killed; and I crouched down at the bottom of the cab, as much under the seats as I could get.'

By this time the general interest, with its consequent enquiries, was broken up into several channels. One voice was asking for the cabman. There were many answers.

'He's killed!'

'He's not.'

'It ran off t' stand.'

'He war' drunk.'

'He waren't.'

'He'd nobbut left it for a second to post a letter to his mother.'

'Tha' me'ans his gran'mother.'

'He's a liar.'

'He'll loise his sitiation.'

‘He ought to loise his ’eard.’

‘Well, if it war’ owt loike thine, lad, he could ger another i’ ony wood-yard.’

‘Now then, move on there,’ cried a helmeted guardian of the peace, passing these disputants, and seizing the leg of a small urchin, who refused to bring out his head from between the spokes of a broken wheel, and giving a tug at it.

The boy howled, but did not comply, probably because without much dexterity and a considerable allowance of time he was not able to bring it out.

‘God bless you, Maurice,’ Mr. Oldfield said for the third time; then turning to his daughter. ‘Bell, we’ll take another cab, if you dare get into one, and call at the doctor’s on the way home.’

‘Ay! God bless him,’ echoed a rough

voice, the owner of which had turned out from an adjacent beer-house to see the sight. ‘God bless him, and damn that drunken cabman. He did it well. I seed him, a drunken scamp as ought to be horse-whipped, God bless him! And three cheers for the young lady as performed beautiful—fit for a actress!’

A burst of laughter followed the climax of these somewhat confused sentiments, in which even Bell joined; and, in the midst of their laughter, Mr. Sharely the stout clergyman was discovered for the first time after the accident, and finding himself once more in what seemed his natural element—laughter—he presented himself to Mr. Oldfield and Bell with a beaming face.

‘And is this the little daughter of

Nimshi who driveth furiously? My dear, you've had a miraculous escape, and you nearly frightened an old parson to death. But *he* wouldn't have been missed just now. Eh, Oldfield? And you are really not hurt at all—*Laus Deo*. But it's worth two thousand pounds, two thousand pounds, Oldfield, ha! ha! ha!

Mr. Oldfield winced at this last sally, but the cab was already waiting, and Bell, timorously laughing, was ready to get in.

'You had better come with us,' said Mr. Oldfield, turning to the clergyman, who had been assisting Bell into the cab with many bows and smiles.

'Delighted,' he replied. 'Maurice, to-morrow at twelve—your rooms. Good-bye, my boy, and till then, pleasant thoughts, *two thousand of them*, ha! ha! ha!'

‘And so, my dear,’ he said, turning to Bell, opposite to whom he was already seated, ‘you have yet courage to go on wheels? Eh! oh! it’s the pleasantest way—my life used to go on wheels, and it sometimes goes on one now—my dear, did you ever read of St. Catherine?’

‘Why, she was *tortured* on a wheel,’ said Bell, looking with puzzled, amused eyes into that strange clergyman’s comic face.

‘So she was! so she was! and your father was on the wheel, dear, when you flew past us, and didn’t even bow. Somebody or other is always on the wheel, they must be. It can’t be helped. Do you like violets, my dear?’

Bell now was tittering in her handkerchief, unable to answer him; but she looked through the window, and saw him

bartering with a little girl who had a basketful of violets, and had edged her way into the crowd, for a moment quite forgetful of the chances of trade in this enjoyment of a new and cheap horror. Bell began to think she would like this curious clergyman, if he would only not laugh so much ; and when she saw the little girl's face grow radiant, and Mr. Sharely lifted in the basket and emptied all the contents, about thirty bunches of violets, into her lap, she was *sure* she liked him.

‘ Don't, my dear—pray don't thank me ! Sweets to the sweet—ha ! ha ! No wonder your father was wild with joy when he found you safe. Now, why doesn't he come ? ’

This was what Bell was wondering ; and now, after thanking Mr. Sharely for his

gift, she called out, with sweet imperiousness,

‘Papa!’

‘Yes, dear. Well, good-bye, Maurice, I’ll see you to-morrow,’ he added, at last, turning away from the young man with whom he had been taking leave in subdued tones.

Maurice’s face wore again its old expression—serene, somewhat sad, and slightly cynical. Bell did not hear his last words to her father, which were only whispered, Mr. Sharely just then attracting her attention to something out of the other window.

‘Your child is restored to you, but——’

‘Hush, sir, not now!’

Then Mr. Oldfield got into the cab and said through the window, in his ordinary

voice, 'Well, good-bye, Maurice; I shall not soon forget this afternoon; and you won't forget this gentleman's kindness, will you, Bell?'

Bell smiled at him through the window, and said, 'Never, while I live,' and begged him to take one of her bunches of violets, in her prettiest way. He took it and smiled, and raised his hat, and the cab rolled away.

As Maurice turned on his heel and walked quickly from the scene of the accident, his smile died away, his face hardened, and the cynical lines came out deep about his mouth.

'Saved again!' he muttered; 'but the screw gets weak, only saved by a fluke—"To suit the wit of that bit of a chit." I shall get two thousand pounds. And I

did nothing but elbow these louts out of the way. So I'll elbow the lot of them yet.'

That night at the Elms was a curiously happy night to Bell. She was complimented a great deal, she was petted a great deal, and she was made to laugh immoderately. Before she went to bed, she wrote a long letter to George, who was away at school—a letter bristling with descriptions and brimming over with love. Ah! what agonies George would have suffered if the day had ended as it might have done. Bell knew all that—none better, and hence the great tenderness with which she concluded, and signed herself, 'Your darling Bell.'

Reading it over in her bed-room, she laughed and cried; then went to sleep and

dreamed, but her dreams could not be described. There was a series of runaway carriages with St. Catherine bound to every wheel. There were lamp-posts that turned into comic clergymen, and crowds of people pressing round her that were metamorphosed, when she put out her hands, into bunches of sweet violets.

Meanwhile, when Bell had had two or three hours of such excitement, Mr. Sharely was getting into his hansom to drive to his hotel. Mr. Oldfield stood on the doorstep, and waved his hand in a very friendly way. Mr. Sharely waved his hand back from inside the hansom with a final laugh. In that hand was a piece of paper. It was a cheque for two thousand pounds. Surely Mr. Sharely was a jovial, kind-hearted cleric, *sui generis*, or he was a great rogue.

As a matter of fact, he was the former. He was an old bachelor, the rector of a quiet little country town, with a good many easy duties, and one absorbing project, to see 'his boy' Maurice a great man.

Now Maurice Miles was a man with a history, and Mr. Sharely had watched that history as it was made, from the day when he had stood god-father to him in his own church, to the present time, when he was a stock and share-broker in the town of Filesfield.

Through every vicissitude of Maurice's life (and there were some that had been very startling) Maurice Miles had remained Mr. Sharely's *protégée*. He had always shown himself a great and true friend, when Maurice had been in need, and

Maurice's needs had been frequent. He had everlastingly been in need of money. Since Mr. Oldfield had been in Filesfield he had lent Maurice Miles, from time to time, large sums of money, and often he had lent them with a very bad grace.

There was something without doubt that placed Mr. Oldfield in the power of Maurice Miles, and Maurice did not scruple to use that power. Now both these men, so far as Filesfield knew, had clean hands and clear consciences ; but they had had transactions together in the past that would have startled Filesfield.

Mr. Sharely certainly knew *all* Maurice's history, and a good deal of Mr. Oldfield's, and *he* helped his boy to 'put the screw,' as Maurice termed it, on Mr. Oldfield. But it must be remembered that Mr.

Sharely, though a well meaning and kindly clergyman, was very simple, and often very indiscreet ; and Maurice Miles was as deep as a draw-well.

Mr. Oldfield, it may be said now, was a man who had made one huge mistake ; and he was still suffering for it every day of his life ; but *he* certainly did not seem to be a bad man.





CHAPTER III.

EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED



GEORGE OLDFIELD at eighteen was a well-grown boy, who looked his best in buckskin leggings, but was oftener seen with a book. He had his mother's hair and eyes, which were both soft, but his mouth was firm, like his father's. He was to go up to Cambridge in a month or two and study medicine. That had been arranged; but George did not care much for medicine. He dreamed of becoming a writer.

He had recently begun to write a book entitled 'My own Life, by an old Bohemian.' He had got up to folio 120, attained his thirty-second year, gained a great reputation for duelling, and lost—well, among other trifles he had lost his sweetheart—one, at least; his left arm; most of his money; and, to speak as a faithful critic, all his senses.

From that it may be seen that George Oldfield at eighteen was not a realist. At the same time he was a great reader. He had read the lives of the authors; those lives which, 'next to the Newgate Calendar, present the most sickening chapter in the history of man,' and still he wished to become an author.

From that it may be inferred further by some people, that he was a fool, but it

seems to show that he was not a coward.

Bell was a year older than George, and now veritably 'a woman grown.' Ned Wyndham, George's great friend, would have thought 'beautiful' a tame word to describe Bell; but he was in love with her; she was his heroine, his ideal, his Genevieve whom he had *not* won, and did not just yet seem likely to win. In truth, Bell was a sweet and sensible young woman, who thought and called Ned Wyndham 'a nice boy.'

Ned's father was a doctor, and *he* was going to be a doctor, without doubt, and was not going to Cambridge. He revelled in drugs and in 'operations.' He had already successfully applied the stomach-pump to a cat of Bell's which had swallowed a mouse supposed to have been

poisoned, but probably not. The cat recovered its health, but never recovered its regard for Ned Wyndham. She fled from his face ever after, as from a vivisectionist—a creature who had avowed himself the elect enemy of the animal world.

It was at this period—when George was eighteen and Bell nineteen—that Maurice Miles paid his first visit to the Elms. George Oldfield always remembered the occasion. Mr. Miles interrupted a conversation in which George and his father were growing more confidential than they had been, or perhaps could have been, while George was quite a boy.

It was a beautiful, balmy afternoon early in September. Bell was out, and they were sitting together by the open

window. Not a breath of air moved the curtains; not a ripple of motion stirred the graceful elms, as they slept in the yellow sunshine that flooded the moss-green lawn. Mr. Oldfield was looking through the window in a dreamy way through the film of his cigar-smoke; and George was pulling the ears of a sleek fox-terrier on his knee, in a similar apathy of after-dinner content.

Suddenly Mr. Oldfield, turning round, asked :

‘How old are you, George?’

‘Why, I’m eighteen, father.’

‘Eighteen! Bless me, you’ll be a man directly.’

Now this seemed a very casual commencement for a serious conversation, yet

such quickly followed. The apathy of the elder man seemed to vanish as fast as the last wreath from his cigar—the cigar soon followed, unfinished, out of the window—Mr. Oldfield's brows began to twitch. He was thinking rapidly, it seemed unpleasant thoughts ; and soon he spoke again.

‘ You must work hard, George, when you go to Cambridge ; and if you have not really settled it to be a doctor, you must decide on something soon ; for I might as well tell you now, my boy, what I have been thinking of telling you for months, you will have your own fortune to make entirely. It would be unkind of me to conceal from you any longer that the money we live on, or almost all of it, will pass away from us at my death.’

George Oldfield started slightly at this announcement, but immediately exclaimed :

‘ My dear father, I intend to work hard; but don’t, please, talk of dying. You won’t die for twenty years.’

‘ I hope not, my boy, I hope not, but a time comes, George, when every man must look his destiny in the face. Years ago I had to set my face resolutely to a life which I thought, then, would be very short ; and yet you see how merrily things have gone on. We are all pretty happy together, aren’t we ?’

‘ Bell and I are very happy, father, but we have often thought and said to each other that there is something which prevents *you* from being happy.’

At this reply, uttered somewhat diffi-

dently but deliberately, the father looked at the boy with pain, but not displeasure.

‘ You children, George, are very foolish, and, when you have everything to make you happy, you go about hunting for something to make you wretched. Has your Aunt Elsie been talking to you ?’

Aunt Elsie, it should be said, paid long visits to the Elms, generally once a year.

‘ No, father,’ George replied, ‘ Aunt Elsie has never said anything to us except that one time when we were very young, when we were leaving her to come here, she made us promise then never to ask you why you did not live with mother and us when we were little children.’

‘ The stupid woman ! That’s just it, and you got it into your heads that there

was some mystery hanging about those days—something romantic, perhaps. Well, so there was !’

Here that usually sombre and kindly man laughed a short laugh which sounded more bitter than gay. But the laugh and the irony passed away in the same breath, and he again looked grave.

‘George, you are very young, but I think you are more thoughtful than most boys—than most young men, shall I say?—of your age. Now listen to me and clear your mind once and for all of those romances only possible in penny fiction. From the time when you were about six, up to your mother’s death when you were about nine, I *couldn’t* be with you. Before then, we lived very happily together; and after

that time I used to see you and your mother at times. Bell remembers those little visits.'

'I remember sitting on your knee and playing with your watch-chain,' said George, 'but it's a very dim memory; I've wondered sometimes if I really remembered it or Bell had told me about it; you brought us a lot of foreign toys, some queer wooden soldiers, with directions mother couldn't read—in Spanish, I think.'

'Well I remember it, George, as if it had been last year. But during all that time I couldn't live with you, I had been implicated in a great law-suit, and I had to keep away; some day, if you wish to know, I may tell you every detail. It nearly broke my heart not to be able to get home

before your mother died. Then I was in Australia making a new home for us all. That project I gave up when we came to live here after my wife died. The law-suit implicated others ; and for that reason I think you are too young to be told about it ; but some day you shall know all, It had to do with the money in which I have a life interest. But for that law-suit which I couldn't talk about, I should have spoken to you seriously before now of making the best use of your time, and not depending on money that you will never have from me. There, my boy, is the romance and the mystery of your childhood. Now you must be a man and make your fortune. Thank God I can provide, in some little way, for Bell !' Here Mr. Oldfield looked with a confident quiet smile

at his son. 'I think you won't suspect *me*, George, of having done anything very iniquitous. I was entangled !'

'No, indeed, father,' said George, eagerly. He had been lapsing into 'long long thoughts' of the past. 'I'm glad you've told me !'

'So am I, my boy ; but I wouldn't mention it to Bell.'

'No,' answered George ; and they both grew silent.

At that moment the ponderous latch of the old green gate was lifted, and the gate opened. George Oldfield has said that the flood of autumn sunshine which fell upon it, as it swung open, was flashed on his mind hundreds of times afterwards when thoughts of bygone days came suddenly back.

Both of them looked out, when they heard the sound, with languid curiosity ; but Mr. Oldfield's face suddenly changed. Then, rising up, with a look of new interest which seemed a quietus to the themes they had been discussing, he exclaimed,

‘ Ah, it's Mr. Miles ; but you don't know him, I think. Come along. We will go out to meet him.’

A minute later, the three of them were standing together under one of the old elms, and George was surveying, with undisguised interest, that unwelcome intruder upon their interview—the first interview he had had with his father after he had ceased to regard him, in every sense, as a boy.

Mr. Miles may be briefly described as he appeared then, a young man of about

thirty. Dressed in a brown suit of the smallest check, remarkably well-fitting, but not noticeable on the score of fashion ; over the average height ; well-made, with regular, very regular features. He had a drooping dark moustache, evidently 'groomed' with fastidious attention, and quiet, dark eyes, never opened to their full extent, which seemed always to be observing, and always *were* observing, something.

Mr. Oldfield was not noticeably cordial with his guest that afternoon ; but he was very courteous, and Mr. Miles, George thought, was deferential. That he had been expected to afternoon-tea was evident.

As George walked up and down by his father's side, joining only very seldom in the conversation, he soon found Mr.

Miles's languidly drooping eyes unobtrusively taking him in. He saw his father and this new guest of his exchanging glances, evidently about *him*; and when they had left him to go into the house, he heard Mr. Miles say, as if some opinion had been expected, 'a clever boy.'

'Who the dickens is this Mr. Miles?' was the question George propounded to himself, as he whittled a stick under the elm-trees, waiting for Bell's return.

Meanwhile, Mr. Miles took the very seat which George had left by the open window. George saw them through the branches, talking and smoking like two old friends. Sometimes they smoked in silence. There was no constraint. They made no efforts to entertain each other.

George might well ask, 'Who the dickens

is this Mr. Miles?' He had never seen his father stopped once in the street by a friend—had hardly ever seen him nod to one.

'Bell,' he cried, when at last the welcome bobbing of a red sunshade over the old wall put an end to his vigil, 'come round here by the arbour; I've something to tell you. What do you think? The governor has found a friend; he has come to tea.'

'No?' she answered. 'Is he an *old* man?'

'No. He's young, and rather handsome; and a deuced good fellow. A Mr. Miles.'

'Mr. Miles, the sharebroker? Why, I know him; he's ever so nice. I *ought* to know him; he is the gentleman who took me out of the cab—that frightful accident. He was the first to help me. He—he perhaps saved my life.'

‘The deuce he did! Then he’s not, after all, a *bonâ fide* importation of the governor’s. Oh, Bell! Bell! But he can’t hold a candle to Ned Wyndham; and he’s thirty, if he’s a day. I’ll tell you what it is, Bell,’ George continued, ignoring the amused smile on his sister’s face, ‘I shall have to look after you better. And poor Ned! I believe he’d emigrate.’

‘You dear goose!’ laughed Bell. ‘Let him emigrate, and take Mr. Miles with him. You know I care for nobody but you and father.’

‘Yes, Bell, that’s very pretty—girls talk in that way, I know; but you must remember that father can’t live for ever, and I—well, young men sometimes do strange things; and I should like to see you make a good match, Bell.’

An unfeigned burst of laughter was Bell's only answer to George's oracular remark.

If to-day George had been called, to his great content, 'a young man,' Bell's laugh made him very glad to come down again to familiar ground. So he gave up the 'man-of-the-world' pose, and asked, with some concern for Ned's chances :

'Then you don't really care for this Mr. Miles, Bell?'

'No,' she said. 'I've only met him out once, and I thought he was rather nice. Of course I'm greatly indebted to him, and I've known he was father's stock and share broker for a year and more. And now,' she said, looking at her brother with undisguised idolatry—a look George had reminded her, on previous occasions, would

have been more becoming in his mother, — ‘I must run and see after tea. Kiss me, you dear boy. That tail-coat certainly suits you. Why, George, if you would only give up smoking cigarettes, you’d almost pass for a man.’

George did not seem hurt, and certainly was not angry: ‘It was only Bell!’

Bell seemed to enjoy that afternoon tea very much. She was never very vivacious, but could make herself very entertaining, even amusing, in a quiet way. When she was happy, her face showed it to her great personal advantage. Her smiles brought out her beauty, and Mr. Miles seemed early to acquire the art of awakening them.

Mr. Oldfield seemed rather more than normally happy too, and talked and

laughed over tea more than he was wont. Once George caught his father's eyes glancing from his guest's face to Bell's, and saw his brow darken for a moment into that old gloomy expression which he had seen so often. But it was only for a moment.

On the whole, Mr. Miles's visit was an occasion which everybody, himself included, had enjoyed. His expressions of enjoyment had certainly been mild; but then all his expressions were mild. And if Bell's flushed face, with its good-bye smile—a rather deeper smile than most of them—offered a contrast to Mr. Miles's serene and pleasant adieux, it would yet have been evident to that young man's intimate friends (could any have been found) that Bell had made an impression.

‘By Jove, Bell,’ said George to his sister in their little confab after supper, ‘Mr. Miles will do the governor good! I hope he’ll come often. What do *you* think about him now?’

‘Well, I rather like him,’ she answered. ‘And I agree with you, he will do papa good. Papa certainly likes him. He has grown familiar with him, little by little, in their business transactions, and, now the ice is broken, I think you will have your wish gratified. He will be sure to come again.’

Mr. Miles did come again. He came many times in that month, and Mr. Oldfield and Bell seemed to like him more after each visit; but George did not—he took an aversion to Maurice Miles.

During that month, George tore up ‘My

own Life.' It seemed very boyish. Mr. Miles's advent had marked, perhaps hastened, a period in his growth. He was to be a young man.





CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE EXPLOSION.



It was one of the last days on the summer side of autumn. The afternoon sunshine fell with a warm glow on the trellised wall, the white pigeon-cotes, the big green dog-kennel, and the fresh, healthy face and arms of a singing servant-girl who stood in the doorway with a bucket in her hand.

‘Is that hot enough, Mr. George?’

George, who at this moment was not fastidiously attired—who, in fact, was in

his shirt-sleeves, with a cap at the back of his head—lazily stooped down and put his hand in the bucket.

‘Thank you—yes. It will do, won’t it, Ned?’

Ned Wyndham, who was whistling, with a solemn face, ‘Wait till the clouds roll by, Jenny,’ with the barrel of his gun in one hand, and the stock in the other, contented himself with looking at the steam rising from the bucket, and nodding his head.

The servant-girl stood for some moments looking from one to the other, with an amused expression, reflecting, perhaps, that gun-cleaning was as interesting as any work she had to do, and quite as dirty. Then she looked up at the kitchen-garden, where Mr. Oldfield and Maurice Miles and

Bell were inspecting the celery beds, transferred her attention again to the young men—particularly Ned Wyndham—said ‘Humph!’ and went in singing,

‘I’ll tell you what it is,’ said George, who had now begun to syringe the barrels of his gun in a methodic moody fashion. ‘I’m thinking Cambridge sometimes will be pretty dull,—confined, you know. And I shall miss *you*, Ned. I’m a bad hand at making new friends.’

‘I think I should rather like to go, George, but it wouldn’t pay. As for making new friends,’—Ned stopped short and glanced somewhat uneasily up the garden, where those three figures, still grouped together, were leisurely strolling over the box-bordered walks.

‘Well! I’m not frightened of you getting

very thick with Mr. Miles,' said George. 'But you mustn't neglect us. You'll drop in and see the governor, and—Bell?'

'Yes, oh yes,' he answered, the 'oh yes' contrasting curiously, in its mock cheerfulness, with the first solemn 'yes!'

At this moment Bell came towards the door where they were pumping the black water through their gun-barrels. She was without a hat, and the sunlight, falling on her bright light hair and radiant face, made her look very pretty. She was animated—her movements were quick; and taking up her skirts with dainty disdainfulness, as she reached the scene of their operations, she looked into the bucket, and then into Ned's face with a teasing laugh, which showed her ivory teeth and sweet dimples to perfection.

‘What are you doing, you dirty boys? Are you making ink? Is it ink for George’s next book, Ned?’

‘No,’ replied George, while Ned only smiled a longing smile,—‘we are making a compact to frustrate that which you’ve been hatching up there in the garden. Where are you going, Bell?’

‘I’m going for my hat, they are afraid I might get a sunstroke.’

‘Oh!’ said her brother. ‘They are *very* thoughtful. In fact, Mr. Miles thinks too much. *We* usedn’t to take such care of you. Did we, Ned?’

‘I’m afraid not! We weren’t old enough to know your value, Miss Bell——’

Bell laughed and disappeared. In another moment she came out of the door again, and George affected to drench her

with the water he was forcing through the barrels of his gun.

‘Now then, look out!’ he cried, Ned Wyndham only looking on, this time disconsolately.

Bell just laughed, but did not even turn her head. She had got her hat—a round sailor hat, with a Cambridge blue band. She was twirling it in her fingers, her eyes fixed on the two figures up the garden; and George and his friend soon saw that their little efforts to win her into their company had been very futile—perhaps hardly noticed.

The eyes of both the young men followed Bell’s movements—Ned’s pathetically, George’s somewhat scornfully.

‘Her ladyship has shot up lately, Ned. Why don’t you smoke a cigarette? I see

the governor and our mutual friend are smoking. I think I'll follow suit !'

'I wouldn't now, George, if I were you. I don't care to ; somehow it makes me feel more of a boy than I am, when I'm seen smoking. How old do you think I'm taken for, George ?'

'Well ! Bell takes you to be younger than I am ; but Bell's sometimes an ass. Just look at her now. I'll tell you what, Ned, it's no good beating about the bush with *you*. If you want Bell, you'll have to cut in quick, or that fellow won't give you the chance.'

'George, you're a brick, you've done your best for me ; but it's no good. I *am* older than you, just so much older as to be able to see we've been a couple of young

fools. Why, Bell called us "dirty boys," a minute ago! and somehow I always feel a boy when that Miles is about. But I've loved Bell as I shall never love a girl again. Throw that in my teeth whenever you get the chance. And I'll tell you what I should like to do, I'd like to fight that Miles, if that would settle it. But it wouldn't. Bell loves him, everybody knows that, and he's a deuced handsome fellow; and heigh-oh! "Off to the wars I'll go!" as the song says. Hand me that rag; and be quick with those locks, they are free enough, I want to get off. What do you say, George, to a ten miles' walk? Hang the rabbits! I'm restless.'

'Just as you like, old fellow!'

Both the young men now went on with

their work in silent diligence, both fixing their eyes from time to time on the trio in the garden.

They saw Bell adjust her hat and re-adjust it, (it suited her and she knew it,) and then look at her father for approval. He patted her cheek, Maurice Miles looking on with the quiet gratification of a complacent admirer. Then she looked at Mr. Miles, a delicate pink bloom on her cheek, and laughed at the admiration which he, of course, expressed with a delicacy peculiar to him; and then the three of them sauntered on—this time in the direction of George and Ned.

Coming close up to them, only Mr. Miles deigned to notice them. He remarked, 'Warm work, isn't it?' in the coolest voice, then plucked some tinted ivy leaves from

off the wall, and began to parley laughingly with Bell about a pin, which she at first refused to give him.

Eventually Maurice Miles appealed to Mr. Oldfield, who said something at which they all laughed. Then Bell produced a pin; and while she blushed and looked down on the gravel walk, Mr. Miles very slowly and very carefully pinned the leaves on to her light dress and looked at them; and from them he looked into Bell's face with an expression of great satisfaction, and perhaps something more, which made Bell blush again.

At this point Mr. Oldfield, that wise, silent, observant man, who must have known what he was about, disappeared in the forcing-house, by which they had been standing—a place which he always said he

could not breathe in—and Maurice Miles and Bell sauntered off by the old ivied wall up the kitchen-garden, looking into each other's eyes, very much like lovers.

George had been watching them rather malevolently from under his contracted eyebrows. He had put his gun together again by this time, and inserted blank cartridges to dry the barrels. Now, merely saying 'Humph !' he cocked the triggers, and, without any notice other than a wicked smile at his friend Ned, he discharged both barrels in the same second, and turning on his heel, walked into the house.

A shot would not have startled Bell if she had been further off, or if she had had any warning ; but this double report, almost close to her, in her present mood, made her jump right off the ground. Then

she wheeled round—a momentary annoyance in her face—while Maurice Miles smilingly took her hand and kept it. She only saw the backs of the offenders; her brother was disappearing in the doorway, and Ned was looking after him.

When Ned looked round again, he only saw their backs, and heard Mr. Miles say, still holding Bell's hand,

‘Boys will be boys. They did it on purpose.’

‘Imps!’ replied Bell. ‘I thought they were too old for that.’ Then she turned round, now laughing. ‘Ned!’ she cried. ‘Do you know I’ve a heart? It nearly jumped out.’

Ned only looked confused, and stammered something about ‘George drying the barrels.’

But George, appearing at the door again, called back :

‘It jumps too soon, Bell! You’ll be losing it, if you don’t mind.’

This remark made Mr. Miles smile quietly, and look in her face inquiringly, while Bell looked on the ground. She had looked on the ground that afternoon a good many times under Maurice Miles’s gaze.

‘George!’ said Ned, following his friend into the house, his gun under his arm ; ‘you’ve put the last nail in my coffin, and Mr. Miles understood you.’

‘I’m glad he did. We shan’t have to fight in the dark. Maurice Miles is right enough for the governor, but he won’t do for *me*. We shall never hit it off. This is the first time I’ve been right down mad


with Bell. We might be children. I suppose next they'll bring us chocolate. Yes! Bell's in love, Ned—there's no disguising it. *You* will lose her, and I shall get a brother-in-law I should like to kick.'





CHAPTER V.

GEORGE'S LITTLE ROMANCE.

‘ REMEMBER, when I think, that my youth was half-divine.’ So says that cynical shell of an emptied life in the gorgeous ‘Vision of Sin.’ So do many of us remember youth, though we have never pressed out the great purple grapes of Life into such dazzling goblets, nor drunk later such bitter draughts ‘of the dregs of the cup of trembling.’ Perhaps we have never had the chance. Perhaps we have

been too wise. At any rate, youth, early youth is a golden time. George Oldfield's was.

At Cambridge, after a little succession of oscillations between a too gay and a too sedate life, he took his old course. He shunned the gregarious side of University life, and cut the Union. He looked upon it, perhaps very foolishly, as a place where men were pretending to be orators. On the few occasions he went there, he was oppressed while listening, or trying to listen, with the idea that the whole proceedings were hollow. The eloquence seemed hollow, the applause hollow; the facts alone were all that did not seem hollow—they were heavy enough!

Such were his thoughts—pardon his judgment!—the last time he came away,

with a proof of the first poem a magazine editor had ever accepted, in his pocket.

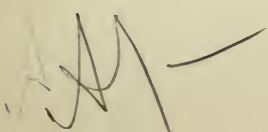
‘This poem,’ said George, ‘with my name to it will be read by one hundred thousand readers. It is something real. I am dealing with the world. This institution is a game, and I have played games enough.’

That was a vain thought for so young a man, but it had some truth in it. However, of George’s life at Cambridge very little need be told. He was an ordinarily good fellow, paid his subscriptions and his calls, read easily, was rattling company on occasion at a small supper, and made a little reputation for originality. He would *not* be bored. He chose his amusements as he chose his books, for the pleasure they gave him, rather than for

the satisfaction they gave others. Medicine was kept in the background. He read only for the ordinary B.A., and dabbled in literature.

An incident—as it turned out, a most remarkable incident—must now be narrated. George has been at Cambridge eighteen months; he is twenty years old.

It is the May week—the gayest week in the year at Cambridge. The town is *en fête*. The college halls, libraries, and gardens are swarming with visitors. The freshman's river is alive with laughter. The shimmer of light dresses and lovely faces mingle with the bright blazers of the young athletes who ply the oars. There are entertainments every afternoon and evening. Cambridge is wholly given up to play.



This is the time when the sisters and cousins of the men come up in troops, see their heroes cheered on the river, wave their handkerchiefs when the bumps are made; go to college luncheons, get initiated into 'Varsity slang; forget that the world has any distinctions to offer, either for brain or muscle, that are not academic; feel that life is a gay, bright thing, and, if they are not already immersed in that felicity, promptly fall in love!

Bell was coming up to Cambridge this May, but a little illness of her father's has prevented her. She will come next year, in George's last May.

Maurice Miles, long ago accepted as Bell's lover, has been up; but only for a day. He was in London and ran up just to see

what the 'bump' races were like. He did not seem vastly interested; and, though George entertained him royally, he went back to London by a rather early train without causing much disappointment to his host.

George is rather set up with having a poem in the *Cambridge Review*—just in that number which everybody buys. It has made him a bit of a lion. But that is a trifle!

He has seen, at last,—he has not been very impressionable hitherto,—a girl that has quite upset him. He has seen her several times—in King's chapel; in the glorious green avenue of his own college, Trinity; on the bank of the river at Fenditton, waving her costly scrap of scented

cambric, amid a gay galaxy of men, who were too rich for George to know much about.

George might have gazed at her, grown sentimental, and then forgotten her; but the remarkable thing is, that each time he saw her, he found her attentively regarding *him*. Once he saw her making a movement, almost pointing in his direction, while she asked a question of one of the men near her.

The man looked immediately at George, and then answered her, upon which her face lighted up with pleasure. Whatever could he have told her? George was hardly famous, his poetry was not so wonderful as *that*.

In the early stages of this hide-and-seek business, young Oldfield once caught

himself repeating those beautiful sad lines from 'Faust,' in Bayard Taylor's translation :

' My peace is gone,
My heart is sore,
I never shall find it,
Ah ! never more.'

But the next day he was mumbling to himself, in a rather maudlin state of mind, odd bits about 'affinities,' about 'hearing it again,' and a 'grand amen.' The 'grand amen' came, verily !—soon after—and the first sound of it almost shook the young man out of his senses with delight.

George was standing by himself in rather a 'moonstruck attitude.' Close to him was a happy crowd scintillating with bright bonnets, parti-coloured blazers, red sunshades, and white flannel trousers—with dabs and patches of sombre colour to

set them off! The arms and faces pertaining to this motley mass of colour indicated alike a lively interest in what was passing!

It was the boats—the last of the May races—filing down in procession, laden with flowers, over which, from man to man, passed the big silver wine cup.

Healthy and jolly, they rowed mid-stream through the thundering cheers on either bank; and many a face was singled out by sweet keen eyes that had been waiting an hour, just for that look; and many a glance was exchanged that was dreamed of afterwards.

But one pair of eyes, at least,—perhaps the finest on the field,—were looking a different way, and George's were looking nowhere at all.

A man touched his arm—a Trinity man, whom George knew only very slightly.

‘Well, Oldfield, are you making a poem?’ Then, turning to a friend whom he had brought to George’s side, he said, ‘This is the rising poet whom you are dying to know. Let me introduce you. Oldfield of Trinity—Hooker of Magdalen.’

The men shook hands, and then Hooker said,

‘I’m awfully glad to know you. I think your poem this week is—is—something quite out of the common. In fact, it is making quite a sensation. Er—I—well, to make a clean breast of it, there is a lady, a friend of mine, who has read it, and does nothing but rave about it. She is dying to speak to you, and to effect that felicity, if you will excuse my candour, I

got a friend to introduce me to Brownrigg that he might introduce me to you.'

George, who had remained silent while these remarks had been somewhat awkwardly made, now curled his lip a little, and looked with amusement at his new acquaintance.

'It is really very flattering. Is your friend—the lady—a reviewer, may I ask? I'm overcome.'

'No, no,' said the man, laughing back, and at the same time directing his eyes towards a tall dark girl, distinguished from the many others near her both by her very handsome face and her lithe willowy figure.

'Is *that* the lady?' asked George, with manifest interest.

'Yes.'

‘I’m delighted to surrender myself. Pray lead the way. I’m your devoted lion till you are pleased again to think me an ass.’

‘Think you an ass! I think you are the best fellow in the world. I shall have won Miss Vernon’s good opinion for life—and I shall also have won a five-pound note—for I made a bet she should know you in five minutes.’

George laughed, and the next second was making his bow to Miss Vernon—what a pretty name she had!—the lady he had worshipped from afar, his syren of the last six days, the divinity in Mechlin lace and cambric whom it was his fate to touch at last.

The boats, the people on the banks, Hooker of Magdalen and his friends—

some very piquant and fashionable demoiselles among them—all faded from George's sight. They did not *seem* to fade away, but did so. How exactly, and under what precise circumstances, he could not have told; but in ten minutes he was alone, among the leafy avenues, with the creature of his dreams.

To effect this just then had not required a difficult manœuvre; but such credit as there was in it was due to Miss Vernon, not to George. However much he had wished to be left with this wonderful admirer of his, it was she alone who had been daring enough to lead him into solitude, under the pretence of following him.

And now they have been alone in the soft, early evening under the green leaves

of May, talking every second—with their eyes as well as their tongues—for half-an-hour. In truth, they look like a pair of lovers ; though Miss Vernon looks anything but a romantic school-girl, revelling in her first flirtation. She seems twenty-two or twenty-three. She has a very decisive mouth. Her eyes are the blue eyes of Erin (not of Saxony), clear and deep and strong, capable of passion, capable of hardening into hatred, but utterly incapable of any sentimental simperings. Miss Vernon was not a woman who carried her ‘heart on her sleeve for the daws to peck at.’

Yes ! They have had half an hour of each other’s society undisturbed, and still seem as much engrossed as ever. It is Miss Vernon who is now speaking.

‘Do you really like carnations better than any other flowers?’

‘Most certainly I do, and now always shall.’

‘Then, I will give you these—but they are faded, and what can you do with them? Men hate carrying flowers, I know. Better give them me back.’

‘I would rather not, unless you repent. Thank you ever so much!’

‘No! no! I wasn’t repenting, a pink for a poem is poor recompense. I suppose, even in this abandoned age, you will get ten pounds for a poem! But am I prying?’

‘Not at all, not at all. Your ideas are refreshing—they inspire me—you speak “of what the world *will* be,” when poets have passed away; at present, there are a

good many of us, and we get ten shillings, not ten pounds for a poem. I myself, Miss Vernon, have sometimes received a guinea; but then, as you have so beautifully conceded all this evening, I am a great exception.'

Miss Vernon laughed—snatched a leaf as she walked—crumpled it in her hand—looking away from George; then she suddenly wheeled round with a dance in her deep blue eyes, and said quietly,

'You *are* a great exception!'

After that, there was positively a minute's silence. Then George said,

'Miss Vernon, you won't think me impertinent. I don't mind you thinking me a fool—I'm used to that imputation—the muse entails it on me. Do you believe in coincidences?—I mean, do you believe

there is something in them that is not dreamt of in our philosophy?’

‘Indeed, I do!’ said Miss Vernon; ‘and that question makes me think again of something I was going to tell you, five minutes since, when you laughed it out of my mind.’

‘Tell me now,’ said George, in a voice free from any laughter.

‘You ask if I believe in coincidences. Well! listen, and say if I should or not. I see you standing in a crowd of people—it was five days ago—not looking at what everybody else is looking, but at me—and to speak candidly, rather rudely. I immediately think of a poem I have just read in the *Cambridge Review*. That poem depicts pathetically the fate of a young girl who loved, with a love beyond her

years, a strong, worldly man with no romance in his nature. He seems to disregard her—she droops; then he discovers his mistake—turns from his money dreams and his cynicism on love and marriage—clasps his little devotee to his heart, *and she dies*. Those are the items of the poem without the scenery and the music; they rush through my mind, and in the same second I see the face of a man standing close to you—indeed, I thought he was with you—who played exactly that part in the little romance of a girl I knew. Poor little Violet! she was only a governess, but her life was a poem. There were coincidences for you with a vengeance, Mr. Oldfield.'

'Yes, indeed! By the way, what kind of a man was he—the man who was standing by me?'

‘He was a tall, handsome man—I should know him in twenty years, though he wouldn’t know me, now—with a dark drooping moustache, and mysteriously stedfast eyes.’

‘What?’ said George, rousing himself out of his dream; ‘a drooping moustache and dark quiet eyes! Do you know his name?’

‘His name is Maurice Miles. Was he really with you?’

George started at the name.

‘Yes! he is—er—I know him very well indeed.’

‘Do you really? But let me go on with my coincidences. Next, I have the honour of talking with the author of the poem. He declares that my favourite flower is *his* favourite flower, though that

no doubt was flattery—a poet's license—finally I ask him to recite off-hand any favourite verse that comes into his mind—not an easy thing to do ; and he recites—recites very beautifully—a verse I love :

“ My peace is gone,
My heart is sore,
I never shall find it,
Ah ! never more.”

Now, Sir Poet, having propounded the question, what is in coincidences?—tell me what you think of those !

‘ Impossible !’ said George. ‘ It presents to me a labyrinth of bliss, in which I am quite content to be lost—with you !’

When George said this, Miss Vernon fixed her deep blue, black-lashed eyes on him with an inquiring, amused look. The faintest smile was on her face.

‘ You are not like the man in your poem !’

‘No, and I’m not like Maurice Miles.—By the way, did that girl really die? How long ago was it, Miss Vernon?’

‘Oh, it was a long time ago. Yes, she died, poor little Violet,—I did love her. Of course she was not an angel, like the girl in your poem. She was very fond of pretty dresses, and never had the money to buy them. In fact, she rather coveted riches—and Mr. Miles, I hear now, is very rich. Is that so?’

‘I believe he is very well off.’

‘But isn’t he rich? I thought he was very rich.’

‘May I ask what you call rich, Miss Vernon? Riches and poverty are only relative terms.’

‘No, indeed. Don’t ask me!’ said the lady, looking languidly at the rings on her

hand, and the lace on her dress. 'I suppose to be rich is to be able to get everything you want—but I daren't hazard any figures. I'm afraid I'm very ignorant. Has he one hundred thousand pounds?'

'You are evidently very ignorant of poverty, if I'm not rude in saying so.'

'I suppose I am—comparatively ignorant, as you would learnedly say—yet mamma only allows me two hundred pounds a-year, and I should like a thousand. My little friend who died had only the money she made from china-painting. She was a very poor clergyman's daughter, and used to mend her father's clothes and make her own dresses. But then she lived out of the world. She was never brought out—had never even seen London. Violet knew what poverty was, and she loathed it—

though she never told people so—only me. I couldn't imagine what poverty is like. I fancy it wouldn't suit me.'

'I fancy not,' said George, in a tone that indicated he did not care for the theme. Then he added, with more interest: 'And did she love Mr. Miles very much?'

'Oh! she adored him.'

'And did he adore her?'

'From what I could see, he almost worshipped her; but then I didn't know him—except through Violet. I wonder if he has ever fallen in love since—I should rather like to know.'

'Well! I can tell you that he *has*.'

'Has he? Is he married?'

'No! he is not married yet.'

'Is the girl very beautiful?'

'Very.'

‘Is she light or dark?’

‘Light.’

‘Is she very rich?—I beg your pardon, is she *comparatively* rich?’

‘No, she is comparatively poor.’

‘Impossible! That is a mistake Mr. Oldfield.’

‘Pardon me, I happen to know the girl’s circumstances very well. What makes you doubt it?’

‘Because Mr. Miles had only two ideas in life—I hardly know, nobody ever *did* know, which had the priority—they were wealth and Violet, or else Violet and wealth.’

‘And he has two ideas now, Miss Vernon,—wealth and Bell, or else Bell and wealth.’

‘Bell!—what a name!—Bell what?—who *is* Bell?’

‘She is my sister.’

Miss Vernon stopped—dead still—and made a gesture with her hands; then she looked hard—as if wholly absorbed in reading some unfathomable riddle—in George’s face.

‘Mr. Oldfield, will you tell me now, what I am to think about coincidences?’

‘No, Miss Vernon, if you don’t object I would rather talk about something the very opposite. Coincidences have made up for me the happiest hour I have had in my life, but they are not to be depended on—I won’t trust them till to-morrow. Tell me, when will you be pleased to devote another hour to the poets and to the elucidation of these said coincidences? Am I rude? Are you angry at my request?’

‘No, no, you are only young and very original; but I go to London this very night——’

‘Stop! stop!’ pleaded George. ‘Do walk slowly. There are your friends!’

Yes! there they were, sure enough, on Clare Bridge, whither Miss Vernon was now drifting apparently quite unconscious of their existence—as they seemed of hers—a lady and two gentlemen, leaning over the balustrade and laughing.

‘Another happy coincidence!’ said Miss Vernon, with a smile, that was brilliant, but not altogether beautiful. Well! it might not be, for it cloaked a lie. The place and the time of this meeting had been arranged, and the engagement kept to a minute.

‘This very night!’ echoed George, as

Miss Vernon halted at his request and looked mildly into his eager eyes. ‘And may we never meet again? I should like—I should like to have gone a little deeper into those coincidences; they might, at least, have amused you another hour, Miss Vernon.’

‘Well! this is not the end of the world, Mr. Oldfield—we may meet again; but I must go now. See! my friends have seen us—and haven’t I been rather indiscreet? I shall be scolded—good-bye!’

‘One minute, Miss Vernon!’—George Oldfield was a young man, a very young man, and he had taken out his pencil and an envelope from his pocket—‘Tell me where—where I could send you a poem on “coincidences.”’

‘Well, really, just now that would be

impossible—and I must go. If you were one of those gentlemen on the bridge, you would say so too. Even perfect patience has its limit. And do you know—but how could you?—I am shortly to be married to one of those gentlemen !’

‘Married to one of them !’ said George, with a startled look, which doubtless was very unaccountable and very ridiculous.

‘Yes,’ said the lady, feigning not to see that the announcement had made any impression, ‘to one of them. I cannot yet certainly say to which—I don’t know.’

George looked aghast for a moment, then laughed a hard, little ironic laugh ; then gazed straight again into Miss Vernon’s quietly-smiling face and turned very sad.

‘Good-bye,’ he said ; ‘I wish you had

known which it was. You would have been more likely to be happy.'

'And do you care about my happiness—you who haven't known me an hour?'

'Yes.'

'And do you really care for those carnations?'

'Yes.'

'Then give them to me.'

She took them from him—George neither acceding nor resisting. She held them to her face and kissed them; then looked at them again, turned them daintily over and kissed them on the other side. Then she gave them back to him.

'Take them; from a friend, for what she has often longed for—one hour with a real poet. *Au revoir!*'

‘Good-bye,’ said George.

‘I said *Au revoir!* but good-bye, if you like.’

George shook his head; a little, mechanical, silvery laugh came back in answer. The flutter of a super-fashionably fine dress, and a faint odour of some exquisite perfume, betokened the motion of something vanishing, and George Oldfield found himself alone, saying—don’t call him a fool!—

‘My peace is gone,
My heart is sore,
I never shall find it,
Ah! never more.’

On leaving George, the lady who had so enamoured him joined her friends on Clare Bridge, and the remarks she then made, and those she made later on, when the

gentlemen were absent, may be considered interesting. They would certainly have electrified George Oldfield.

‘Yes,’ she cried, in answer to a general chorus of inquiries, ‘I’ve been delighted. Now I know what a real poet is. He is much better than I thought. He is right-down clever, Lord Rathnew, and he has made me very thoughtful.’

Lord Rathnew was not a young man. With most people he passed as a very solid and sensible man, but he was sadly afflicted in not being able to pronounce his R’s.

‘Weally, now, that is hard lines on us, your majesty—pwovokingly hard lines. We wait for our queen to come back and make us happy, and she comes back and makes us vewy misewable. Was he agwee-

able? Some of those clever men are vewy disagweeable.'

'He was very agreeable—he was *charming*. In fact, the time flew so that I could not realise at the end of it that I had robbed him of a whole valuable hour. Time to him is valuable. It must be a delightful sensation, Mr. Goldwin,' she added, turning to the other gentleman, 'to find time valuable, mustn't it?'

'Delightful, I should imagine,' he replied. 'This last hour has seemed to me an age. By the way, had your new *protégé* the proverbial cut? Had he the poet's boots and elbows?—noticeable for their irregular admission of daylight. But perhaps you would not notice trifles of that kind. Genius throws a halo even over a pair of boots.'

‘I *did* notice most particularly,’ she replied, looking down as she spoke at the patent leather boots and white kid gaiters of the inquirer, ‘he was faultlessly dressed; though I don’t remember anything he had on except a little pin like a violet.’

‘A violet, *ma chère*!’ laughed the other lady. ‘No wonder you noticed that.’

The two men laughed too, and said something else, and so they talked on, till they reached their hotel, ‘The Bull.’

‘Weally now,’ said Lord Rathnew, on the steps, ‘I never wose to clever men—they are often not agweeable fellows; but now I shall be more fwightened of them than ever. He has made you pwovokingly quiet—I must weally say it, almost mowose.’

The lady laughed at this. She had not

laughed all the way; and then turning round, as she ran up the stairs with her friend, she said, archly :

‘You are said to be rather quiet, Lord Rathnew—you should put up with quietness.’

The two ladies entered the same chamber, and, almost before the door was shut, George’s new friend, twitching off her eight-buttoned, cream-coloured gloves so violently that she tore one of them almost in two, planted herself before a mirror, and stamped her foot.

‘Oh! I have made a fool of myself; I have sunk very low! He called me *Miss Vernon* twenty times. If I could only have escaped giving a name—I almost wish now I had given my own.’

‘Is that all that’s troubling you, *ma chère*? You can be at peace. A detective could not help him to trace you. The links which led up to your introduction could never be put together again.’

‘It may be so; but I’m vexed with myself for the whole affair.’

‘Did you learn all that you wanted to learn about our friend?’

‘I think so; but there was very little that I didn’t know—and what lies I have told! Oh, I hope he will never find it out; and yet, do you know, I should like to see him again. Poetry—bah! I certainly have not read much of *that* for many a year. And I pretended I knew nothing about money—what do you think of *that*, *ma chaperone*?’

‘I think you were clever, as usual. And

the poet himself—the charmer's brother—was he *really* passable?’

‘Passable? Young Oldfield *may* be a poet, for anything I know, but he is certainly a man, and a very fine man. Yes! I was going to twirl him about my fingers, and examine him; but he examined *me* and very nearly began to twirl me about *his* fingers. I thought once I should never be able to introduce the subject at all, and faith! I began to be more interested in young Oldfield himself than in Mr. Miles or his sweetheart either. If Miss Oldfield is anything like her brother, our friend will have met his match. I'll tell you what, my dear—if I had to be a romantic school girl, and run away to be married, young Oldfield is the man I would run away with.’

‘ But you have not, *ma chère*, you have to run away with somebody else. So, be quick, and get ready for dinner ; give over brooding and make yourself pretty. You were rather hard on “my lord” to-night, and I think he’s the best of the two. What is the saying, “ Money flies and beauty fades, but a title lasts ! ” ’

‘ I don’t know,’ said the lady who had called herself Miss Vernon. ‘ I have a headache. I don’t think I shall go down to-night—I should be bored to death. I will have a cup of tea here in my room. Let us say good-night.’

‘ Your majesty is acting foolishly not to choose one of them now, when you have the chance, this very night.’

‘ Why didn’t *you* choose one ?’

‘ Because I have not the chance.’

‘ Well ! I shall not choose one to-night. Do you know, I feel wretched—I wonder how my father is to-day. Young Oldfield made me think of him—I think I will write to him ; it will do me good.’

‘ And to-morrow——’

‘ Oh ! never mind to-morrow. Perhaps I shall be married by the archbishop’s licence, perhaps I shall join a sisterhood, perhaps——Marian,’ she ejaculated, in an altered voice, ‘ you have never seen me cry, have you ?’

‘ No, Violet, *never* !’

‘ Then why don’t you go, before you do ? I’m not well—I’m very much upset. I’m thinking about my father.’

Marian kissed her—women always kiss ; if a woman were the public executioner, she would kiss each victim of her own sex

before she dispatched her. She kissed her and left her ; and Violet cried. Heaven and she only knew exactly, what for—probably—only heaven !

And that was Violet, the poor governess, ‘ her majesty’s ’ little friend that died. Indeed, she seemed to have died. So had circumstances turned her, or seemed to have turned her, into another woman.

In the quiet little town of Tricester many years ago, when Maurice Miles was making a long stay, with Mr. Sharely, its amiable rector, he and Violet had fallen deeply in love. Ah ! she *had* loved him and he had loved her truly and well. The romance—to Violet a blissful, intoxicating romance—only lasted a month ; then she found something out, something about

Maurice Miles, and her dream was over. They did not quarrel, they only went their separate ways.

‘Love is of man’s life a thing apart,’—Maurice Miles pursued his destiny : money—‘but it is woman’s whole existence.’ Violet never forgot him—never perhaps gave over loving him, despite the shock she had met with.





CHAPTER VI.

A STRONG AVERSION.



GEORGE OLDFIELD, undoubtedly born under the planet Mercury, had the poetic temperament, and was susceptible to shocks; but, being remarkably healthy in body and mind, he could throw them off rapidly.

Less than a month after that strange hour passed with Miss Vernon, he might have been seen lolling out of the window of a friend's room in Cambridge market-

place, whistling, 'When I went to the bar,' from *Iolanthe*, chaffing the fish-men in the square below, and practising the 'drive' catch by means of an orange, with a man in a neighbouring window.

He had not forgotten Miss Vernon : he had resolutely dismissed her.

In that first week he had followed his impulses in making a few inquiries to find out something about her—but it was of no avail.

Brownrig had only known Hooker of Magdalen five minutes ;—Hooker had been out of residence for two years ;—the man who introduced Hooker did not know a woman in the world, except his bed-maker, and did not want to. It was no good ; and, on the whole, George was glad it was so. It settled his mind and made

it easier for him to throw the little romance just as it was into the well of memory—there to be petrified into a perpetual dream, that he could look down upon at will.

So time passed on, and George found himself at the Elms again. He told his little romance to Bell, and Bell told him she knew all,—all about Violet.

‘She was the daughter of a poor clergyman. She was a governess in Tricester, where Mr. Sharely lived, and there Maurice met her years ago.’

‘Maurice keeps nothing back from me, George,’ said Bell, ‘he showed me once a little keep-sake that the child had given him—she was barely seventeen—and he asked me if I was jealous of it—if so, he would throw it away. Of course, I laughed at

him—though it almost made me sad—not jealous. Who would be jealous of the dead?’

A day or two later, Bell told George that Maurice had not the least idea who the lady of his romance was, though he knew Violet had a particular friend; he saw her once, but not to speak to. She lived in London, and her father, he believed, was enormously rich. Violet used to talk about her; but Maurice rather disliked her influence over Violet—she was very worldly.

George was inclined for once to agree with Maurice, though he did not say so. Miss Vernon was certainly worldly; but she was a wonderfully beautiful girl, and he could not forget her. So he thought, and let the matter rest. Bell hardly ever

alluded to it again, and he *never* did—voluntarily.

Time passed on at the Elms much in the same old way. George's little romance has had its effect. He feels himself a man indeed now ; and sometimes a sad one.

He has a grievance which would be rather difficult for him to formulate. Bell is as fond of him as ever. Mr. Oldfield is quite as indulgent to him. Maurice Miles, who, when he is in Filesfield (for he is often away), spends half his time at the Elms, uniformly makes himself agreeable to George. But it is Maurice Miles who creates his grievance. As George predicted at the outset, they do not 'hit it off.'

'I'll tell you what it is, Ned,' he once

said to his old friend, ' I can put my whole grievance in a sentence : " Maurice Miles has taken my place at the Elms." Even the servants look upon him as one of the family, and, try as I will, I *can't* like him. I certainly cannot point to anything directly against him except this—this absorbing consciousness that he has taken my place !'

Often did George Oldfield wish earnestly that he understood more about commerce, about financial matters, about his father's concerns. It had long been the same old tale, ' It's no use asking George, papa,' when those little problems incident to every household presented themselves at the Elms, incidents not usually important except in the aggregate, when the

head of the family appears in the breakfast-room with a letter or papers in his hand, and begins instinctively to take counsel's opinion. 'It's no use asking George, papa,' had often been said; but now it was, 'Ask Maurice, papa.'

Very unreasonably, George was even jealous of his sister's love for Maurice Miles.

'Maurice gave me that bracelet, George. Isn't it handsome?' or 'Have you seen "Iolanthe" at Cambridge, George? Maurice took me last week.'

Scraps of praise for Maurice, like this, would make George frown, and sometimes afterwards make Bell cry. But it was Maurice's influence over Mr. Oldfield that cut deeper than anything.

'George, Maurice has been advising me

to raise the rent of those cottages at Shingley.' George did not even know the rent.

Again, the same day, it was :

'George, I think, after all, I shall cut that tree down.' This was a tree sacred to George and Bell, with G and B cut in big clumsy letters, so deep that seven years' growth had left them as plain as ever. 'Maurice says it darkens the window ; and Bell has, at last, withdrawn her protest.'

George usually contented himself with a frown or a harmless bit of cynicism, when his father foisted Maurice and his innovations, as he put it, on his notice ; but there was one occasion when he did not so content himself, an occasion, though it seemed trifling, which Mr. Oldfield remembered for a long time.

‘George!’ Mr. Oldfield said, when they were coming home from a walk in which they had not been very companionable, ‘Maurice has been suggesting you should be a surgeon—take your degree, and the M.R.C.S., and let the M.D. alone. It would take more hard reading than you care for, and Maurice is certain (he knows the world, you know!) that you wouldn’t make a living as a physician merely for ten years. I’ve often feared so myself, but I’ve let you have your own way. However, I’ve asked Maurice to talk to you. What do you think?’

‘I think,’ replied George, who had been waiting his time, biting his lip, and growing red in the face—‘I think Mr. Miles had better mind his own business—if he has any. I will be a surgeon if *you* like;

but when I require Mr. Miles's opinion about a profession, I will ask him for it. Perhaps he could make me a stock-broker. It seems a very lucrative calling, and leaves a lot of time on a man's hands for managing his neighbours' affairs.'

'Tut! tut! you silly boy! Mr. Miles's interests are ours. He is only thinking of your good and the good of the family. He is a practical man, and the fact of it is, George, you are not. I really don't know what you *are* going to be. But that wouldn't matter if you knew yourself; a surgeon would do—but you'd have to work. Look at your friend, Ned Wyndham; as for writing books—bah!'

After this drastic little speech, George speedily cooled down; and soon the conversation drifted again into smoother channels.

In a few days George had forgotten the effect his hasty words had produced, but Mr. Oldfield remembered the incident. He could not conceive why George seemed so to dislike Mr. Miles ; and George could not tell him. How could he ?

He only knew that it was so ; and that Maurice was never out of his mind. It was ‘ Maurice, Maurice, Maurice ! ’ eternally. He hated the name—only the *name* then ; but the time was fast approaching when he began, reasonably or unreasonably, to hate the man.





CHAPTER VII.

FOG SIGNALS.



ANOTHER year passed away, and George had no more romances at Cambridge! In a few months he was to sit for his final examination, and take his B.A. At present he was enjoying the long vacation.

It was a sweet, sultry afternoon in August. Aunt Elsie was visiting at the Elms. She had not been there for two or three years, and was rather astonished to find Bell such 'a woman grown.'

A small table had been brought out for afternoon-tea on the lawn under the biggest elm, which, owing to Bell's relentings, still stood as the recorder of happy hours gone by—a green glorious monument sacred to the memory of G and B, as they once had been, and also as a serious detriment—Maurice and Mr. Oldfield insisted—to the narrow-windowed drawing-room.

Bell was presiding in the best of spirits, although Maurice was not there. He had gone to London, it was expected for some rather long time.

Aunt Elsie was sitting next to Bell, and looked, in that strong light of comparison, very prim and a little demure. She was the kindest soul alive; and had a pair of eyes that might have figured with wonderful effect in some love-story long ago.

George often caught them beaming on Bell in a way that made him think his dead mother was looking at her through her sister's eyes.

But long loneliness and lapsing years, that leave no record in the growth of children, bring lines of something unpleasant, some negative unloveliness worse than anxiety, into faces from which a mother's cares could never have stolen the sweetness.

And now, as Aunt Elsie looked thoughtfully over the tea-things into vacancy, or into the past, Bell's light-hearted vivacious chatter and George's bantering remarks to his sister made her knit her brows.

Their incontinent light-heartedness brought out a momentary touch of tartness, an all but imperceptible sourness,

which evanesced and was gone with a word—evanesced like one drop from a lemon in a tumbler of soda-water.

‘My dears, you’re as noisy as children. How old are you now, George?’

‘Twenty-one next November, aunt.’

‘Twenty-one! Twenty-one! Bless me! Henry, is George really twenty-one in November?’

Mr. Oldfield was leaning back in a creaking, capacious basket-chair, in an exceptionally tranquil state of mind. He was always most tranquil when Bell and George were inclined to be boisterous. George’s occasional gloomy fits made him restless. And when Aunt Elsie looked at him, asking this question with an air of surprise, which seemed unwarranted to George, he returned to the table, so to

speak, and to the company seated there, from his isolated serenity.

He had been leaning back abstractedly dropping pieces of bread-and-butter over his shoulder on to the ground, as it seemed, but a periodic snap and one corresponding wag of a dog's tail, intimated where and when each instalment disappeared.

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Oldfield, leaving the dog, and extricating a fly from the cream-jug with such a display of skill as suggested a pretext for delay in answering; ‘twenty-one next November, aren’t you, George?’

‘And he’s never been ploughed, aunt,’ Bell put in, rather irrelevantly, but anxious to say something in George’s favour.

‘Ploughed, my dear?’

‘Yes, dear aunt—failed in an exam. They call it “ploughed” at Cambridge, “plucked” at Oxford.’

And so Bell glibly proceeded to enlighten Aunt Elsie on the vast possibilities of defeat which George had escaped; and Aunt Elsie listened and looked delighted till Mr. Oldfield, too, began to talk about Cambridge and then of London.

From London the talk drifted to Maurice, and the word Maurice made Bell drop all other subjects, and draw Aunt Elsie along with her. Of course Aunt Elsie had been told a hundred things about Bell’s lover, and had asked a hundred questions, all of which had been answered—so far, at least, as Bell had been

responsible—to that gentleman's credit. She had been very anxious to see his photograph, but in this wish she had not been gratified, for the simple reason that nobody had one or had ever seen one.

‘Yes,’ Aunt Elsie was saying, ‘I should like to have seen Mr. Miles, my dear,’ when a very curious incident happened—a very curious incident indeed, as it turned out to be:—the old green gate opened, and Maurice Miles came across the grass!

Well, that was not so very strange, after all. Something like that happens to everybody, at some time or other; but when Bell cried, ‘Why, he’s *here*, papa!’ Mr. Oldfield started, and looked—not surprised merely, but perplexed. Rising up suddenly, he pushed his chair back,

trapped Dash's foot and made him yelp. Dash, on receiving no apology—a remarkable omission—went, with an injured air, to Bell. Bell ignored his claims too—a more remarkable thing still to Dash—and brought such an abject look into his face that Aunt Elsie, who was already fond of him—she was fond of anything with four legs—caught him up with a cry that set his tail wagging with instantaneous forgiveness.

‘You dear doggie! Will no one notice you? Which foot was it?’

The drive, semicircular in its course, was only a short one, and Mr. Miles not following it, but crossing the lawn, was in the midst of the little party as soon as they had fully realized who the new-comer was.

Bell rose from her chair with a happy, flushed face. Mr. Oldfield had risen before her, with a face as serious as Bell's was gay. His brow contracted, his manner seemed uncertain. He was like a man unwillingly making a move at chess before his mind was made up. Aunt Elsie still leaned down and fondled Dash.

George saw the expressions on his father's face, and marvelled at them. Did Maurice's unexpected return indicate something was wrong? He looked quickly at Maurice. Maurice was raising his hat. He seemed serene; the old placid, George called it mechanical, smile was on his lips, but while he was approaching Bell, whose radiant face was beaming in welcome, his eyes were unmistakably fixed on Mr. Oldfield's face.

Mr. Oldfield looked hard—it seemed sternly—at the unexpected visitor, spoke a brief, embarrassed welcome, and then turned to Dash with thoughts—whatever they were—for which Dash was doubtless as irresponsible as the Sphinx.

And now Aunt Elsie raised her face from the pacified Dash and looked at Maurice Miles. Mr. Oldfield coughed.

‘Oh ! Elsie, let me introduce——’

There he stopped, and looked helplessly into Aunt Elsie’s face. Then he glanced quickly towards George and Bell. Aunt Elsie’s face had turned as white as marble. A tremor passed over it ; then the colour came back with a rush, all in a quarter-of-a-minute ; and Mr. Oldfield smiled.

‘I know what has so disturbed you,’ he

said, 'you were struck with a remarkable resemblance. So was I three years ago. You remember, Maurice, my look of surprise?'

Maurice smiled, and said,

'Perfectly.'

Aunt Elsie still looked aghast, and said nothing. George looked on the scene with a calmness of expression, not free from malevolence; while Bell simply stared, as if Nature had especially designed her—in a phlegmatic and deceptive age—to be a model of open-eyed astonishment.

Mr. Oldfield, who was naturally clumsy in the art of dissimulation, now put his unpretentious boot on Aunt Elsie's pretty little foot, and said, in a tone more resembling his usual voice,

‘Well, now let me introduce him. Mr. Miles, Elsie—my sister-in-law, Miss Cornbrook.’

Aunt Elsie gave her hand, with a nervous smile, to Maurice.

‘I certainly was startled,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t help showing it.’

That, indeed, was true, and she showed it still. Now that the fluctuation of colour had ceased, she remained pale.

‘I hope,’ answered Maurice, with one of his finest smiles, ‘I may be able some time to awake some little interest for myself, that will make you forget the shock I unconsciously caused you. But you have caught a chill. Well,’ he added, ‘could I fetch a wrap for your aunt?’

But, while addressing this question to

Bell, it was noticeable that Maurice looked for an answer to Mr. Oldfield.

‘Bell,’ said her father, eagerly catching the telegraphed proposal, ‘fetch your aunt a shawl, dear—at once ; you will find one soonest.’

Bell went off with alacrity. Mr. Oldfield watched her as she disappeared, and then turned to her brother.

‘George,’ he said, quietly touching his arm, and sauntering away from the tea-table.

George followed him, and when the two had walked on together a few yards, the father put his arm confidentially into his son’s.

‘I shall have something to tell you to-night, George, when Bell has gone to bed.

Your aunt *does* know Maurice. We both knew him before you were born. Don't say a word to Bell, till we have talked to-night. I have much to tell you, much that I did not intend to tell you for some months to come. I think Bell took the explanation, didn't she, about the resemblance?'

'I can't be sure, father,' answered George, more bewildered than curious. 'I think she did.'

'To-night!' repeated Mr. Oldfield, turning round abruptly; and they both joined Maurice and Aunt Elsie, who were now talking, it seemed pleasantly, over the tea-table.

Bell brought the shawl, and Aunt Elsie laughed as she took it—a forced laugh—and called herself 'a goose.'

Mr. Oldfield smiled, as if a difficulty were well over ; and Maurice looked at Bell now, as if she only had occupied, or could have occupied, all his thoughts since he entered the gate.

Soon after, he lured her away and chided her (very gently) for being more engrossed in the little pantomime he had introduced than in himself, laughed a gay short laugh as a quietus to the whole affair, and then doubtless told her a hundred interesting things—Maurice Miles was always interesting—about his visit to London.

Ten minutes later Bell was laughing and looking into his face as if nothing had happened ; and when Maurice went away—he went early—Bell went to her aunt, asked with a light laugh if she was better, and then found George. That

young man was alone in the arbour, smoking his pipe very meditatively indeed, with his face between his hands, and his elbows on the table.

‘George,’ she cried, ‘what a curious thing! I thought Aunt Elsie was going to faint. Maurice, they say, is exactly like a young man she knew years ago—an old beau. Papa has told Maurice, and Maurice has told me. But we are not to let Aunt Elsie know we are in the secret; she wouldn’t like it referred to again.’

George smiled sarcastically, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and said :

‘Really! How lucky she was! Is he dead?’

Bell took the remark with a dubious face. If it was a compliment to Maurice, it was ambiguous. But in the same in-

stant, before she could make any reply, George caught her hand, kissed it lightly, and left her looking after him, amused and satisfied.

‘*Au revoir*, Bell! We will talk about Aunt Elsie’s lover another time. The muse is on me. I go to write a poem *à ma Belle*.’





CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING REVELATION.



LET us increase our acquaintance with Maurice Miles. It is midnight. The house is silent. Bell and Aunt Elsie will be dreaming—Bell of Maurice; and Aunt Elsie—perhaps she will be dreaming of Maurice also. But hers will not be dreams in which she will walk again through the rose-hedged meadows of maidenhood, with a lover like Maurice Miles.

And Maurice himself? Will he be

dreaming? Does that automatic, unvarying, often-smiling, ever-watchful piece of human mechanism ever dream? No! One could hardly realise he ever goes to bed. His very clothes seem part of himself; he is always, insufferably, oppressively the same.

A stream of filtered light and the odour of cigars come through the open but curtained window of the room where Mr. Oldfield and George are talking. It is Mr. Oldfield who is now speaking, in a measured voice. He seems to be narrating something with methodic precision. George is only listening and occasionally adding a word.

‘Maurice’s position in the town you know very well, George. He has been settled in Filesfield as a stock and share-

broker for six years now, and I believe there is not a man in the town of whom people talk less. When you have said that of a man, you have given him a full measure of praise.'

'When a man is hardly known to any-one,' George suggested, with a smile, 'he is not likely to have a host of people speaking ill of him.'

'But Maurice *is* known, George, to very many people. He is intimate with some of the best families in and near Filesfield, and he is, in his quiet way, rather fond of society.'

'Is he?' said George, indifferently.

'Where your seeming aversion to Mr. Miles has come from, I can't imagine; but you don't suppose, George, when you were a mere boy, I should have allowed him to

win Bell's heart, without knowing thoroughly who and what he was.'

'No,' George answered. 'He is doubtless a gentleman, and he seems very well off. But——'

'But, what?' asked Mr. Oldfield, sharply.

'He's so excessively reserved, and I have thought—I can't help thinking, though Bell of course is blind to it—he has precious little heart.'

'Tush, boy!'

'Indeed,' continued George, 'I used to say so to Bell, but I have not said a word against Maurice now for months. If Bell loves him, and you have decided he is worthy of her, what have *I* to complain of? It would be selfish as well as ridiculous to say another word, even if it were not now too late.'

‘No!’ said Mr. Oldfield, with quick emphasis. ‘There you are wrong. If you had been a little older when Bell and Maurice fell in love, you ought to have had a say in the matter; and that is why I am going to tell you some startling things now—about the past—my past! You know that people call me a solitary, strange man, and some of them something worse.’

Young Oldfield smiled, then twitched his brows in a manner very similar to his father’s. He was turning over thoughts evidently which he was not accustomed to communicate, except to Bell; and not now often to her.

‘Sometimes, I have thought, father,’ he said, quietly, ‘you give them cause to call you a solitary, strange man. You have never talked of the past, even to Bell and

me ; Maurice Miles knows more about you than I do, and that, perhaps, is the principal reason why I can't like him.'

'My dear boy, you shall know all about me, and about Maurice Miles also. But for that unlucky accident this afternoon, I should not have told you for another month or two, not until you were twenty-one. Give me another cigar, and listen. You are Bell's brother, a very good brother, for the most part. You will have to take my place towards her when I am gone, and I am sixty-two, George.

'Yes,' proceeded Mr. Oldfield, deliberately, as the young man's face assumed a very sad expression. 'I can't live for ever, and sooner or later you must take a burden on your own shoulders which I have kept a long time entirely on my own. Don't

interrupt me, and I will tell you Maurice Miles' history as straightforwardly as I can. It is high time you knew it. Ten years ago, when I bought this house, and came to live at Filesfield with you and Bell, I knew as little of the town or of anybody in it as you, and that was the reason I came. I came to Filesfield to live alone, without feeling or seeming lonely. I sought this retirement, because I was in disgrace. I might say simply to you without explanations that I was a helpless victim in the outreaching devastation of crime. But you shall know all !

‘ Many years ago I was appointed guardian to a young man, who, in due time, was to come in for a good deal of money. He was a very young man, and had been consigned to me with dying prayers, to watch

him and control him. Unconscious of my delinquencies at the time, I discovered too late how sadly I had betrayed my trust. I was indifferent—harsh—cruel! I see it all now! And that young man, with a mind of singular penetration and resolution—steady, hard-working, a veritable despiser of pleasure—was ruined through my gross indifference to the sacred obligations I was under.

‘At an age when the highest ambition of most boys is to make a startling score in a cricket-match, or, at least, to get a sonnet into a fifth-rate magazine, he was absorbed in the idea of making a fortune. He was wise enough, at eighteen, to discuss, with a knowledge of facts and nicety of argument that astonished his elders, the respective chances of gains in the leading staple trades.

‘For my part, I advised law as a profession ; and used to listen to him discouragingly, when he consulted me as his guardian on the schemes he was always developing. I constantly urged him to wait, but when he was just twenty I conceded to his final decision and secured him a place in the office of a London stock-jobber.

‘Well, before he was his own master, before a less enterprising youth would have had, either the interest or the opportunity to entangle himself in any way, the first crash came to this boy’s castle-building—castles of *gold* ! That was his one overruling, ever dominant folly : haste to be rich !

‘He came to me one evening—the only time I had ever seen him excited—and said

—to make the matter short—he must have three hundred pounds, or he would be ruined. Well! I found the money, of course: it was a bagatelle; and, at the same time, I threw away the finest opportunity that was ever offered to me of doing good.

‘I did not talk wisely and kindly to him. On the contrary, I threatened him. From that time, I began with great worldly wisdom, as I thought, to keep a very tight hand on him. In short, I thwarted and irritated him and deprived him of the only counsellor, whom he might have been guided by into a great career.

‘Eighteen months after that time, when he was a member of the London Stock Exchange, he “dropped,” as he technically called it, (I thought the expression flippant

and disgraceful) two thousand pounds. I advanced the money to save him from bankruptcy—the capital of his money was tied up for several years later than that—and then I firmly refused to make any further advances, even in small sums. I steeled my heart against him, and left him to go his own way.

‘ I shall blame myself to the day of my death for acting as I did. In six months, that young man was ruined. He became involved in the most daring and deep-plotted fraud of the day ;—a fraud from the consequences of which no advances on my part could extricate him, and he was sentenced—a harsh sentence on so young a man—to five years’ penal servitude. That young man, George, as I hope you have already surmised, was Maurice Miles !’

When Mr. Oldfield reached this point in his narrative, he made a long pause and looked searchingly, while his brows contracted, as it seemed, with physical pain, into George's face. The young man had spoken hitherto very little, and had indeed surmised from the beginning of the story that Mr. Oldfield's ward was the man he now looked on as his future son-in-law—his own inexplicable *bête noire*—Maurice Miles!

George Oldfield did not say much—so far as words go—even in answer to his father's distressingly mute appeal for his opinion. He moved about uneasily on his chair, asked one or two questions of a rather combative kind, and finally grunted out between his teeth :

‘ It's very hard lines on Bell !’

After a brief interval, Mr. Oldfield again resumed a didactic style; and George, somewhat morosely, settled himself in his chair again to listen.

‘Well, we have been looking at Mr. Miles as he was; but what is he *now*, George? He has his money, and he is under no control. Has he fulfilled the promise of his youth as I in my wisdom predicted? No, Maurice Miles is a rich and respected man. He is very rich, and I am glad he is both for your sake and Bell’s. He doubles his money every two or three years. He is coining money quietly. The gold-fever has left him. He is as safe as the bank. He has had a lesson for life. He is sworn against gambling. But mark my words, George, he will die one of the richest and most respected men in

Filesfield. Stock and share-broker, forsooth! He is the principal partner—the invisible company—the man who pulls the purse-strings in one of the richest firms in Filesfield, and in several little ones also! And who are his friends? Some of the leading men in Filesfield, and the best families round Filesfield.'

'But they don't know——' began George.

'Then what do you think of Mr. Sharely of Tricester? He knows every step of Maurice's life better than I do. He has been a father to Maurice, and is now. When he came out of prison he went straight to Tricester Rectory, and stayed there two months. Would that Mr. Sharely had been his guardian, or that I had listened more to his wise and kind

advice ! He has understood Maurice all the way through.'

'Mr. Sharely,' said George, 'is a very kind, but rather simple man.'

'Yes, yes, that is very fine,' answered Mr. Oldfield, a little angry ; 'but I will go on. I have not yet told you how that trial—that lawsuit, as I have called it to you—affected *me*. It is a long, long time ago since that blight fell on my life, and saddened your mother's life, and even threw its shadow over your life and Bell's ; but those words of the judge, preceding the sentence on Maurice, smite on my heart to-day. They seemed as if spoken to me—the guardian who had so ignored the trust he had solemnly undertaken, rather than to the criminal himself. I remember them word for word.

“If,” said he, “the credulity or rashness of youth, which sometimes falls a prey to old and daring criminals, could be pleaded for this prisoner, I should be inclined to mitigate the sentence, which I am now compelled, however reluctantly, to pass. I regret, however, to say that this has been a case—a singular case—in which the reputation of years has been ruined by the intrigues of one whom the learned counsel for the prisoner has been pleased to call a ‘boy.’ I am bound to state that the only youthfulness I can detect in any of the unscrupulous machinations which have been exposed, lies in the startling freshness and vitality of crime.”

‘As he slowly and unemotionally uttered the crushing words, I felt faint. It seemed as if he were pronouncing them on *me*. I

think I was going to get up and speak. Then came the sentence—five years' penal servitude. My head swam. I dared not look in the dock. My solicitor touched me on the arm, and drew me away. When we were alone, he whispered to me,

“You must make your good-byes as brief as possible. There is a train for Dover in an hour-and-a-half. You must take it, and get off, by to-morrow. You are suspected of implications, and you have given your evidence in such a way as to make you liable to a charge of perjury. If I did not know you, Mr. Oldfield,” he added, “I should myself believe you had committed perjury.”

‘Five minutes later, I said good-bye to Maurice Miles in a felon’s cell and went out, a man made sad for life. My solicitor

was right. Excited and eager by any sacrifice to avert the impending calamity, I had sworn to be a fact what I thought only required a mental consent on my part to make a fact, viz., that Mr. Miles had had at his disposal, unencumbered, the sum of five thousand pounds. I could, and would, have placed that sum at his disposal when, alas! it was too late to save him. The terms of my trust would have allowed me to do so. I believe I had further given very hesitating and even contradictory answers to the questions I had been asked; and animosity in the trial had run very high, owing to the unadvised effort of Mr. Miles's counsel to damage the character of the principal witness for the prosecution, who was a lady.

‘The exact nature of the fraud I need

not attempt to explain—indeed, I could not do it. It was a gigantic tampering, under false pretences, with the fortune of a weak-minded lady of fashion. The prisoners, in short, for several months had been using fifty thousand pounds of her money as if it were their own, and, but for a remarkable turn of luck, she might have lost it all. As it turned out, she did not lose a penny.

‘Within two days I was in Spain. I remained abroad three months; then I came home and was ill. Your mother thought I was going to die. As soon as I was convalescent, the doctors said it was imperative for me to take a voyage to Australia. At your mother’s earnest entreaty, I went. I was away a year, and got quite better; but, strange as it may

seem, on my return to England I became ill again. I became a prey to a debilitating, nervous malady. It became clear that I could not live in England. I went back to Australia, this time intending to find a new home for us all to go to. My health now became completely established. I was coming home uncertain whether to settle in England or return there, as we had intended, when your mother died, and I hurried home to you and Bell.

‘What has happened since, you know, George. For the most part, we have all been happy until to-night. If Bell marries Maurice Miles, we may all be happy again.’





CHAPTER IX.

ON THE WATCH.



N hour later, Mr. Oldfield and his son—the elder man more excitable, the younger calmer than he was wont to be—still sat by the same curtained window and talked of Maurice Miles.

In that hour a great deal had been said. There had been a few hot words; there had been something approaching to a sudden termination of the council in gloomy

silence. The father and son looked on the aspirant for Bell's hand in very different ways.

'Hang it all, my dear father,' George was now exclaiming, 'the man is a returned convict, justly convicted. Even if Bell is rash enough to want to marry him still, as I quite expect she will be, we ought to think of the future. Good heavens! it is no joke—a returned convict!'

'Boy!' said Mr. Oldfield, now snappishly, 'God punishes vice, but the law only punishes crime. If things were justly straightened as we went on, we should all have to be jailers in turn, and they would be lucky men who were *returned* convicts. I tell you, Maurice Miles is now as good a man as either you or I, and perhaps better. *I* am quite content that Bell

should marry him. She will soon know all that you do—she can choose for herself. I only seek Bell's happiness. If she marries Maurice, she will be happy, and so shall I. If *you* are not, it will be your own fault, and as for anybody else——' Here Mr. Oldfield rose from his chair, stretched out his hand, presumably to that despicable possibility of 'anybody else,'—literally to some browsing cows in a quiet landscape-picture—filliped away all further objections with a sharp snap of his fingers. 'Now we had better go to bed, George; I think there's no more to be said.'

Mr. Oldfield then lighted his candle, and going close up to George, looked scrutinizingly into the young man's face by its searching light.

George did not shrink, but he did not like the look. It was complacent, kind, half-compassionate. It was the expression of a strong man, who (unconsciously, it may be,) looks down on something he loves but does not put much trust in. George felt all the force of that look, and it made him uncomfortable. He never realised so acutely before that he had not had the place in his father's heart that he should have had—never had had the place which Bell had—but of her he was not jealous; it was *Maurice Miles*.

‘Get straight off to sleep, my boy, and make yourself happy,’ said Mr. Oldfield. ‘Bell can choose a husband better than you can do it for her. Three months more will decide it all; and my impression is she will then be married to Maurice Miles.’

If she does that, and I can see you launched as a surgeon with a prospect of making a living, you can do with *me* what you like. I shall be a quiet old man, like the ox in the emblem, with a plough on one side of it and a halter on the other, ready for either. I will tell you all about my own money, and about its disposal on my death another time. You have heard enough to-night. God forgive me that I've had so much to tell you.'

As Mr. Oldfield said this, he squeezed his son's hand warmly, and George, who had been looking on the floor, raised his eyes to his father's face, with the tears in them which he could not hide. He only said, ' Good-night, father !' and then paused.

It seemed as if he wished to say something more ; but he did not. Perhaps the lump in his throat prevented him. Perhaps he shrank, after that moment's reflection, from touching again, ever so lightly, the old wound in his father's heart, which that night had bled so much. Mr. Oldfield went out of the room and up to bed, and George at last bestirred himself. He began to pace up and down the room, and then went to the open window and pulled aside the curtains. His head was swimming; he wanted air.

Corresponding with that little stir in the room, was a little—almost imperceptible—stir outside.

A man with a quiet face and dark, down-drawn eyes, stepped further back into the

foliage, looked up at the stars and smiled. It was Maurice Miles. But George did not see him.

Two minutes later, the window was closed—the lights went out—the banging of a door from some remoter part of the house was heard faintly through some other window, from the outside. Perfect silence fell, with the first faint flush of a new day, on the old ivied house. Then there was a tremor among the shrubs—a tremor, but scarcely a rustle. A man stepped out on to the walk, surveyed the old mansion leisurely from garret to basement, lighted a cigar under one of the big, old elms, and then walked noiselessly down the drive, swinging his cane in his hand—a movement which was also noiseless—as if he were going down to

business at nine o'clock in the morning.

When young Oldfield got into his room, he flung himself on the bed with a heavy heart and a mind distraught.

'My little Bell—my little Bell,' he groaned aloud, 'you are going from me—going into the dark. It is all dark. My father has been made a fool of, and Maurice Miles is a devil!'

Then all that strange history he had heard seethed up again with yeasty tumult in his mind. What did it mean? He did not know all yet. That money! It was going to Maurice—it was going to Maurice Miles on his father's death, he was certain. And why? Had his father wronged him? Had he appropriated the money? Was Bell—his little Bell—to be the sacrifice for some sin of his father's, in connection

with that trusteeship, against Maurice Miles? Her face came up before him as it was then—matured, sweet, sinless, and full of faith,—his Bell!—who always thought about him, and never about herself. Then she flashed before him as a child. His little Bell! And now she was going to be thrown away—But no! by heavens! he would stop it yet. Ah! if he had only been a better son. He had seen his father weighed down with cares, and had never tried enough to share them. If he had only done that, and ousted out Maurice Miles, at the first, when his instincts told him he was a noiseless-footed devil, another sacrifice might have been found, but he would save her yet, whoever else had to suffer. By heaven he would!

Then came up the picture of Maurice Miles—might he possibly be a better man than George had thought? Could his father's strange, strong, pathetic confidence in Maurice's change have any foundation? The image of the man came up as vividly as if it were flesh and blood, but it gave no answer. George looked, and reasoned, and remembered, and racked his brains to decide, without prejudice, what manner of man he was. But it was all of no avail. It was like looking at that august statesman, carved in stone, in Filesfield marketplace, which George had looked at a thousand times.

In sunshine and in the rain, in the bustle and clatter of Saturday morning, and in the moonlit midnight, when two

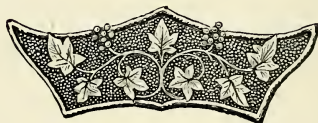
solitary cabmen sat and smoked at his feet, George had looked at him ; but *he* always looked at the great clock in the town-hall, with folded arms, and smiled.

When George Oldfield went to sleep, he thought he was buried alive, and that a colossal image of Maurice Miles carved in granite—an awful tombstone—was pressing him into the earth.

When he woke up fully, he found he was still in his clothes, and the bed had never been turned down. The sun was streaming into his glued-up eyes, and his heart was as heavy as the sins of ten commonplace sinners could have made it ! Verily to be ordinarily good is not necessarily to be happy ; but still it is better to be good ;—much better !

And, when Mr. Oldfield woke up, what were his thoughts? Almost everything—perhaps everything that he had told George was the literal truth, but he had kept back other truth, which would have made his narrative very much clearer to read. He had not told George why he was now so desperately determined to make atonement to Maurice Miles! That would have involved a confession Mr. Oldfield could not bear to make—a confession of the one great sin of his life, beside which the indifference for which he blamed himself as Maurice's guardian was a trifle. *It would* come out, *it must* come out, if only when he died. But, 'Not yet, not yet,' Mr. Oldfield said, as he had said since the day Bell fell in love with Maurice Miles.

Ah, foolish hearts that forget to-morrow's
face will be one day older, and one shade
harsher than to-day's!





CHAPTER X.

HIS REDEEMING POINT.

BELL knew everything now, every detail of Maurice's and her father's history that George heard that night.

'Shall you marry him?' asked her father, when he came to the last word of his narrative.

'Yes,' said Bell, without a comment.

'You are a wise woman and a brave one,' said Mr. Oldfield. 'Many a girl

would have backed out, and have been a fool for doing it.'

George had waited with feverish impatience to hear her decision, and, when he learned it, he took it with a kind of calm despair.

'Just like her!' he moaned, between his teeth. 'I knew she would. Bell never changes. She will never change to *me*—not if Maurice and I never shook hands again.'

At the end of a week from that memorable day—a week in which Bell went about quietly without mirth, but evidently intensely happy—George had his last interview with her on the subject. He had been gloomily watching the lovers for a long time, as they sat in the old arbour—Bell's arbour,—which he had fitted up for

her as an *al fresco* boudoir, with his first complete set of tools, long ago !

Mr. Miles had been reading to her much of the time, in his low, mellifluous voice. Then he had put the book down, and held some wool on his hands for Bell to wind. Their voices floated out to where George sat with a pleasant, subdued, constant cadence, like rain from the leaves in summer. Not a laugh broke the sweet monotony. Maurice and Bell seldom laughed—perhaps intense lovers do not. But George could see, when the wool was all wound, how Maurice held his sister's hand and looked in her face. He could tell as distinctly as if he could see, that his dark, deep quiet eyes rested satisfied on her pure, pale face. Yes, Maurice often had a beautiful, hazy, happy look in his

eyes when they rested on Bell. He loved her very much. And Bell—ah ! George had often caught her looking up at Maurice as if he had been a hero half divine.

True, Maurice was not always so wrapped in satisfaction when alone with Bell. He sometimes looked at his watch, or played with his watch-chain, or made figures as if working sums on the gravel. But to-night, it seemed as if they would both be content to sit in that arbour looking into each other's eyes, and speaking as if in dreams till the sun rose.

George watched them unobserved, then went away ; he came again in an hour, and still they were there. But, at last, Maurice went away. Bell went with him to the gate—George saw him kiss her at the gate.

He took his hat off, and bent over her gently, almost reverently, and kissed her upturned face with lingering fondness.

‘Yes,’ George muttered. ‘He loves her. He certainly loves Bell, if he loves nothing else in the world.’

Three minutes later, George sat with his sister in that same arbour. He did not intend to detain her long. His questions were few and simple, and he had them ready.

‘Bell!’ said George. ‘Tell me; this is the last time I shall ever mention the subject. Do you love Maurice Miles *entirely for himself?*’

‘Yes,’ said Bell, with the faintest start. ‘He is not so rich that you should ask such a question as that! How could you doubt it?’

‘And are you sure that he loves you entirely for yourself?’

‘For myself?’ she said, with a little dim bewildered smile,—‘why, what else *could* he love me for? Hasn’t papa told us over and over again till we are both sick of it, (and Maurice knows,) that we shan’t have more than three thousand pounds between us when he dies?’

‘Yes,’ said George, ‘he has told us that often enough of late; but he has never told us why—not at least in such a way that I could understand it. But never mind that, Bell; tell me this: When Maurice first came here to the Elms, was he *brought* here to fall in love with you?’

‘I suppose,’ she answered quickly, growing red and laughing a little pretty laugh,

‘even if that *was* the case, it was nothing unusual—only those little introductions are generally the province of mothers.’

‘Yes! yes!’ said her brother, hastily, without a smile, ‘but you hadn’t a mother who wanted to marry you off; and father would almost have shot some fellows, if they’d come loafing round. He has never been over-civil even with Ned Wyndham.’

Bell smiled placidly at the mention of Ned Wyndham.

‘Ah, George!’ she said, taking his hand and caressing it, ‘you are very true, and *I* like Ned Wyndham too. I like him more than you think, now he’s no longer a moon-struck boy!’

‘But my question, Bell. Has Maurice Miles been your own choice from the very first?’

Bell hesitated a moment, looked at the ring on her finger, which Maurice had given her, then at her brother, and smiled.

‘Yes! I think so—I can’t tell—and what does it matter, George, now? You know how father admires him—how he thinks he has wronged him, and how different he has been now we are all going to be happy. He is not the same man that he was.’

There was silence for some seconds; then George said:

‘Bell! do you think Maurice’s money—the money father held in trust—has anything to do with ours, with the money we are living on now?’

‘Don’t ask,’ said Bell. ‘Don’t let these questions come into your mind. Don’t

have them, George—I won't, now. Maurice has never hinted at such a thing; no more has father. I can tell you this, George; whatever brought Maurice Miles to me, if anything took him away I should never marry anyone else—and I don't think,' said Bell, now pressing her wet cheek against her brother's, 'I don't think I should ever be happy again, unless it was in a long time—a very long time—with *you*. Oh! George,' she said, now sobbing audibly, 'won't you *try* to like him a little more, for *my* sake.'

'It's all right,' said George, his voice husky and his arm round his sister's neck (he was no ordinary brother), 'it's all right, my little Bell, you shall never hear me say another word about it—and I *will* try—I will try hard! Mind, you've never

heard me say that Maurice Miles was not a fine fellow, and the past is past, but we are—we are so—different. There, there! why, Bell, you are shivering—you must go in directly. Kiss me. Nothing can ever come betwixt *us*, can it?’

‘*Never, never, never!*’ cried the girl, passionately, as she stood with her arms round him and her tears falling on his hand; as near, as dear, as true to each other, and for a second, at least, as forgetful of all else as when they went thus to sleep in each other’s arms on the day of their mother’s death!

At last George released himself.

‘Bell, it’s very late, you must go to bed. Go straight off, if you can, dear—your eyes are red. I am going to smoke a pipe—the pipe of peace, Bell.’

A minute later she had gone, and George filled his pipe. He did not, however, sit down to smoke it. He lighted it in the doorway of the harbour, and went out as if on some definite mission.

His walk was a short one. He went straight to the place where, a week ago, towered that big-branched elm, with its moss-grown initials, clumsily carved in a boy's hand, 'G & B.' It no longer darkened the ivy-choked, narrow windows of the drawing-room. It had been felled three days ago, Mr. Oldfield and Maurice Miles looking on. Its trunk lay now like some great, dear, dead thing to George, its face, with 'G & B' on it, smothered in the earth.

George looked down pathetically for

some moments at the white, table-like slab of ringed deal which was all that was left in the earth of the old green monument. Then he slowly took out a large knife from his pocket, examined the blade, knelt down and began to carve something.

So he remained at work for nearly an hour. When he went away the night was unusually still. The white, solemn moonlight fell, it might have seemed, with a mild, pitying smile on his handiwork. It was very simple, but it seemed to give him a great deal of satisfaction. His face, which the quiet moonlight also fell on, did not betray any amusement. It was a strong, tender, noble face, like the face of a man who had achieved something. Nothing visible, however, had been achieved

except the carving of two, deep, ineffaceable letters on that white slab of wood that shone in the moonlight, 'G & B.'





CHAPTER XI.

DULL DAYS.



Tis winter. George Oldfield has just taken his degree, and has now nothing to do, and does not know what he *will* do next. He only knows he will *not* be a surgeon.

He is supposed now simply to be taking a holiday at the Elms. Christmas is only just over. But, at present, the Elms is rather a gloomy place.

George is manifestly unhappy. He goes

in and out, in a disinterested way, reads the papers, reads novels, and sometimes reads over the novel of his own which he had nearly finished six months ago, and has not touched since. He has kept more aloof from his father than ever, and much more aloof from Maurice Miles.

As things stand, it seems as if there is only one thing he can turn to—by way of a profession—as soon as he is ready to face it. But he is not ready to face it. He shrinks from it. That one thing is the life of a school-master!

George Oldfield fully believed — all amateurs do—that he would make a handsome living by his pen in the course of a year or two. But, for the present, he was despondent—he was restless. He was too restless, even to write.

‘Bell’s troubles,’ as he persisted in calling to himself her approaching marriage, and his own troubles, sat on him with the weight of a night-mare. He grew silent, apparently morose, and nervous. He would sometimes start visibly when Mr. Oldfield spoke to him, in the most ordinary tone of voice. Whatever Mr. Oldfield thought about his son deep in his heart, he sometimes expressed himself in a very unflattering way.

On one occasion, when Bell and her father were taking a country walk, they had some conversation about George, which his sister remembered for some time afterwards with uncomfortable forebodings.

They went together thus almost every day, and talked about the future, and sometimes—only sometimes—of the past.

They had been talking of the future just now; but for some minutes past they had walked in silence along the leafless road, looking reflectively on the dull brown and green landscape on either hand, when Mr. Oldfield turned to his companion, and reverted to the vexing theme with some vehemence :

‘ Mind, Bell ! He will have to choose something. He has his degree. He wouldn’t have had *that*, if I had not foreseen how little he knew his own mind—but as for writing books. It is simply madness ! Maurice will tell you that !’

Bell laid her hand softly on her father’s arm—a soothing touch with which he was very familiar,

‘ George will be all right, papa, he’s very clever ; but he’s not cut out for a surgeon,

Ned Wyndham says so. He has a Cambridge degree, and he's very young. and—and Maurice does not quite understand him. I wish,' added Bell, with a sigh, 'that they understood each other better.'

'I wish they did!' answered Mr. Oldfield, sadly.

'Do you think, papa,—I haven't said a word to George yet, nor to Maurice, it's just my own idea,—but do you think they might go into partnership? George has a wonderful head for figures, you know. He was——'

'Partnership!' broke in Mr. Oldfield, looking down with an incredulous stare, and then laughing into that quiet, pleading face almost rudely, 'my dear child, you don't know what you are saying. George is a visionary—a dreamer! He

might make a sermon, and he's rather fond of showing people the right way ; he had better think of the Church. But stocks and shares ? The money-market ? The real jostling, gold-grabbing, iron-hearted world ? Why, George would simply be a fool at it, and Maurice would know he was one ! It was a ridiculous thought—never hint at it again, Bell—never. I would never consent, if they both asked me—I know them both too well.'

'No !' said Bell, with a sigh, looking on the ground. 'I suppose it wouldn't do ; but I do wish dear George had a better prospect. He is so clever—isn't he, papa ?'

'Yes !' said Mr. Oldfield, 'I suppose he is ; but I wish he was more practical. I wish he was a little more like Maurice !'

Then they walked on in silence again ;

but in another minute Mr. Oldfield broke out with even more warmth :

‘ It’s all that confounded writing, Bell. I wish to Heaven the boy would wake up and see what a fool he’s been. I would rather he would be a grocer than drift on through that fool’s paradise, till he’s fit for nothing but an almshouse. Look at Maurice. He’s——’

‘ It is *not* his writing, papa,’ Bell answered, quickly and sharply, ‘ and I wonder how you can speak so harshly. I often think you don’t understand George at all. It’s because he has nothing to do, it’s because he has no profession, it’s because he thinks you have no confidence in him. And Maurice—Maurice—oh, I don’t know what I shall ever do between them. And if *you*——’

But her father stopped her. He always knew when to do it, and how to do it.

‘Well! well! we must wait a bit! We must wait, Bell. George is a good boy, of course. He has never given me an hour’s anxiety about anything but getting his living; and he’s young enough yet. In fact, he’s very young and a good boy. He might do much worse than go into the Church.’

Bell followed suit with some much more positive testimony in George’s favour, and soon they were engrossed in a companionship closer than ever. So it was always. They were on wonderful terms, Bell and her father; and George had a wonderful place between them.

And Maurice Miles? where did he come? Well, at present one need not ask. Bell is not yet bone of his bone—flesh of his

flesh—but they are to be married in a month!

George looks to the day with feelings which no one knows but himself; for now he never betrays them. True to his word, he has tried to like Maurice more. He has tried hard; but he has not succeeded!





CHAPTER XII.

THE UNFORESEEN.



IT was March, bare, cutting, blindingly bleak March. A few flakes of snow, seemingly the same flakes, had been blowing about in the air for two days, out of the filmy, fleecy clouds. The naked, black elm-trees by the house stood out against the monotonous sky, as if they were iron trees; and the starved rooks on their topmost branches sat silent and motionless as if they were iron too.

A smart, small brougham had just gone out of the gates, the doctor's carriage, when a hansom turned in. The bell was muffled, and the occupant of the hansom, a stout and somewhat diminutive clergyman with a round face, tapped very lightly on the glass of the door, through which he had already seen some one in the hall.

‘How do you do, my dear? You remember me?’

Yes, Bell remembered him very well, though she had only seen him once since that memorable day when she was nearly killed. It was Mr. Sharely.

‘Oh,’ said Bell, when they were in the drawing-room, ‘I’m so glad you’ve come, Mr. Sharely. Papa has been so anxious to see you, and he is better to-day. The doctor says he is a little better.’

‘I came the same hour I got your telegram. And he is better—he is really better? Now, that is good news. The doctor says so? Good! And they sometimes frighten one so. I am afraid, my dear, they have frightened *you*—you look very pale. You must take more rest. Now, is your father very wakeful at night?’

‘Oh! yes,’ said Bell, ‘that is the worst of it. He hardly sleeps at all. The doctor says, but for that, he wouldn’t have had any fears. But papa won’t rest. I am so glad you have come, if—if you can make him rest. I think he wants you to do something for him—some little business.’

‘Ah, yes, yes! Your father and I are very old friends—the oldest friends, my dear; we understand each other’s affairs.

A man always wants to have some one near him who understands his affairs when he is ill; he feels nervous, you know. And Tom, my dear—no, it is not Tom,—George. How is George? And how is our friend Maurice?’

‘They are both very well,’ said Bell; ‘at least, Maurice is very well. George doesn’t look very well—he is tired. He has sat up a great deal, and want of sleep tells on him.’

Bell might have added that other things had told on him too—seeing Maurice constantly summoned to his father’s room, hearing the sick man talk to him for a quarter-of-an-hour together, going in himself to insist on his father’s keeping quiet as the doctor had ordered, and being greeted with a kind smile, full of suffering,

and nothing more ; no confidences, no inquiries, no directions—all those, which were not for Bell, were for Maurice.

Bell might have added that those things made George look tired ; but she did not.

‘ Ah ! yes,’ said Mr. Sharely, ‘ of course, he will be tired,—and Maurice ? You say he is very well. Ah ! I knew Maurice when he was a baby. He was a handsome boy ! Dear ! dear ! and the marriage was to have been next Thursday ; and I was to have married you. I am your father’s oldest friend, you know.’

Bell had looked on the ground without making any reply. Mr. Sharely’s rambling remarks did not disturb her. She had always remembered his odd way of talking. Only the allusion to her marriage day made her start a little ; more from her own

reflections than from anything in Mr. Sharely's way of mentioning it.

‘My dear,—dear Miss Oldfield, I hope I have not offended you, I talk so much to myself—I'm so much alone that——’

‘Oh ! dear, no,’ said Bell.

‘No ! Thank you—thank you very much, my dear. Your father is my oldest friend, and Maurice—Maurice—well ! he—he once made me as ill as your father is now—he played on me for five minutes with the garden hose, and I wasn't able to change my clothes for two hours. He is my god-son. I am very much attached to him. Did he ever tell you, my dear, that I was his god-father ?’

‘No,’ Bell answered, in a sprightlier voice, looking at the little clergyman with new interest. ‘He never told me !’

‘No! no! I daresay not, men don’t usually talk much about their god-fathers—some hardly know they have one—but I’m very fond of Maurice, very; and I think—I think he’s rather fond of me in his own way. He’s a quiet man—a fine man; I look for great things from him! Your father is a quiet man, too, my dear. And so the marriage will have to be postponed—will it?’

‘Undoubtedly, Mr. Sharely.’

‘What a pity! what a pity! I am sorry for Maurice; and, perhaps, my dear, as your father’s oldest friend, you will let me say, I am sorry for you!’

‘Thank you, Mr. Sharely.’

‘Yes! it’s a pity—it’s a pity. You are quite sure your father is better to-day,—decidedly better?’

‘Yes, I am sure he is better, Mr. Sharely. Perhaps you would like now to go up and see him? The inflammation is much less, and he breathes more easily. But you won’t let him talk too much, will you?’

‘Ah! thank you. But not yet, not yet, my dear. I—I’m not yet quite ready, I am rather cold. Do you know what your father said in his last letter to me—that which he wrote three days ago?’

‘No!’ said Bell, ‘not exactly——’

‘Ah! well—perhaps, he was waiting to see how he would be in a day or so—and you say he is better—eh.’

‘Decidedly a little better, Mr. Sharely.’

‘Well! well! my dear, he said very probably my services as a clergyman would not be required at the wedding.’

Bell looked at the visitor with some amazement.

‘He suggested, my dear—you know I am his oldest friend—he suggested that I might possibly have the honour of giving you away. There! there! now don’t be angry with me! I’ve blurted it right out—that’s my way. I’ve lived so long by myself, I——’

‘Oh! no, no,’ exclaimed Bell. ‘I would never be married with my father ill in bed—I would rather wait a year, and so would Maurice. However could he have thought I was so heartless?’

‘Heartless! my dear—you are all heart. No! no! only your father is a very practical man, he hates postponements, and he doesn’t like to stand in the way of people’s happiness. I—I was going to say

I don't myself; that would never do—it would have been just like me—I mean, my dear, I should like to see the marriage over, I should indeed. I am very much delighted—pardon my bluntness—at my god-son's choice.'

Bell blushed and thanked him, but said very firmly,

'It could never be, Mr. Sharely, I would never consent to be even Maurice's bride, with my father ill in bed—perhaps, dangerously ill.' Then changing her voice suddenly she asked, with a look straight into Mr. Sharely's eyes, 'Why should anyone wish it?'

'Why, no! not if you—certainly, my dear, you are the first person to be consulted. But you see there are settlements—rather singular settlements. Maurice's

money has been in trust; and trustees grow nervous. Your father would rather see you married, now the arrangements have been completed, even if the festivities had to be postponed. That is just what he said to me in his letter—what I expect he will say to you, my dear; but of course, of course, your feelings must be consulted before anybody else's, and no doubt you think we are all rather too business-like. Now, don't you, my dear?

‘I think money is a great trouble,’ said Bell, ‘and I wish papa were better; I wish, above everything, that he were well. I should feel very unhappy—I should feel unhappy at the altar, and George, I am sure, would not consent to it. No! no! it could not be!’

‘Well! well! it needn't, of course it

needn't; only your father grows nervous. He hasn't told you yet how Maurice's money stands?'

'No!' said Bell. 'Oh! this money.'

'Well! he will, my dear, then you will understand. He will tell you to-day very likely, if he is well enough; or perhaps he will ask me to tell you everything. By-the-way, how is your aunt, your Aunt Elsie—is she here?'

'Yes!' said Bell, 'she came last night.'

'That's right! I'm glad she's here! She's a sweet woman—a very sweet woman. I don't know her much, but I remember she was like your mother. Your mother was a beautiful woman, my dear. Your father worshipped her. You are like her; I shall be very proud of you—very proud of you.'

I should like to have seen the marriage, before going back.'

Bell looked down with many mingled thoughts, and thanked her strange and candid guest; while he stood before her, now looking abstractedly on her quiet, sad face, and unfolding a piece of paper which he had taken out of his waistcoat pocket.

Bell saw it was a cheque; but she could not see anything else. It was a cheque to pay Isabel Margaret Miles on demand one thousand pounds.

'This is my little wedding-present. It is a cheque, my dear—cheques are useful, and if anyone else happens to have hit on the same thing it doesn't matter. But, dear, dear! I ought not to have mentioned it before the time. It's just like me, I am

very clumsy, and I was thinking how disappointed I should be to take it back.'

'You are very kind,' said Bell.

'No! no, my dear; it's only one thousand pounds, and Maurice is——oh! dear, you'll think I'm a perfect goth, I've lived so much by myself,—whatever made me mention it at all.'

Bell smiled, but her eyes opened visibly at what she considered such magnanimity in Maurice's god-father.

'You are too generous,' she said; 'such a sum dazzles me. Maurice can hardly deserve such a present from his god-father as that, especially,' she added, with a tiny laugh, 'after his efforts to drown you.'

Mr. Sharely smiled.

'But this is for you, my dear, not for Maurice.'

‘It’s the same,’ said Bell.

‘Yes! yes! it’s the same—that’s a good girl. You are like your mother, my dear, and—and your Aunt Elsie. It’s a long time since I saw her,—yes! a long time. Do you think I look very old, my dear, older than your father?’

‘No!’ said Bell, smiling.

‘No? dear me! And you couldn’t be anything but truthful. Yes! she is a sweet woman; but I have lived so long by myself—dear me, what am I saying?’

Bell smiled again, and Mr. Sharely smiled too; then he rose from his chair, with a little cough, looking very red.

‘I am warmer now, my dear, I am quite warm. In fact, I am rather too warm. I think now I would like to see your father, if he is not asleep.’

‘I will go and tell him,’ said Bell.

‘And then,’ said Mr. Sharely, quietly detaining her by the hand, ‘after I have talked with him, we shall have to make another attack on you, a joint attack, and see if we can’t get you to fall in with your father’s views. We shall have to talk to you about Maurice’s affairs,—or do you think,’ said the little man, his face growing wonderfully benign, as he took Bell’s other hand also, and then let one of them go, to pat her cheek, ‘do you think, if your father entrusts it all to me, you could hear a curious, a very curious, romantic story from me?’

Bell looked at him for a moment, without speaking.

‘We have not met very, very often,’ he said, ‘but I think we don’t dislike

each other, and I'm Maurice's godfather.'

'You perhaps don't know, Mr. Sharely, but my father has told me a great deal about Maurice's past life, and about—I think I know the story.'

'Not this,' said Mr. Sharely, 'this is new.'

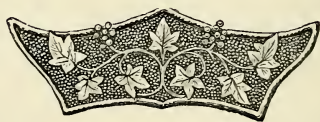
'Is it all about money, then?' asked Bell, with a weary look in her face.

'No, no, my dear! It is a strange story—not much about money.'

'Then,' said Bell, resignedly, 'I shall be glad to hear it.'

'Then you *shall*, my dear,—perhaps this very night. Yes, you are wonderfully like your mother,' bringing his lips with each word nearer Bell's cheek; and he added, with the kiss which he saw Bell would not repulse—'your aunt Elsie.'

‘Yes,’ Bell heard him say, as she slipped away with a smile, ‘I’ve lived too much alone.’





CHAPTER XIII.

'TWIXT LIFE AND DEATH.

BELL did not hear the strange story that night. Mr. Sharely saw his old friend, and sat with him for half-an-hour. When he came out of the room, he was very subdued. He seemed to have shrunk into more diminutiveness than ever. He only spoke when obliged to answer a question, and made very incoherent remarks then. He had evidently found Mr. Oldfield worse

than he had expected, and was very much upset.

Late in the afternoon he went away, but he came again at about nine o'clock. This time Mr. Sharely did not see Mr. Oldfield. He had, however, a long interview with Maurice. When he said 'Good-night' to Bell on going to his hotel, he made a very palpable effort to seem more cheerful; but the effort was a failure.

'Good-night, my dear! It's late—it's later than I thought; and you must get more sleep to-night. Perhaps to-morrow—to-morrow we will have another little chat. I think now your view was the right one. I think I ought to marry you. Eh? Good-night, my dear, and God bless you!'

Bell had held his hand without answer-

ing, except with looks. She understood him ; and her face grew even sadder than it was as she perceived that he thought her father was very ill.

Maurice went away with him, and George and Bell and Aunt Elsie—when one or the other was not with the nurse in Mr. Oldfield's room—sat together till very late, sad and silent, or talking between long intervals, in subdued voices, on things that made them sadder. It was evident that Mr. Oldfield was much worse than he was in the morning, and it was also evident to all three of them why he was so. Each of them shrank from alluding to this cause. But George at last expressed himself with blunt plainness.

‘It’s impossible for him to get better till he gets rest. He *must* have rest, and he

should see nobody. I'll take things into my own hands to-morrow.'

Aunt Elsie sighed, let the knitting fall in her lap, and looked across at Bell with a look that was difficult to interpret. Once she opened her lips as if to speak, but closed them tightly again, and gave a heavier sigh and a more impressive look at Bell. Bell looked helplessly back.

'Yes,' she said, 'if he would only rest;' nothing more, and the three relapsed into silence again.

The nurse, however, expressed her grievance in a more pronounced way to the sympathetic ear of the housemaid, when she slipped down at six in the morning for the earliest cup of tea to be had.

'Yes, he's better—he's always better in

the mornin'; but if he gets out of that bed again, it'll be no thanks to him nor his children. Lord-o'-mercy! I wonder he's consented to go to bed at all! I'm afraid of my life every time he moves he's goin' to say, "Nurse, I have to go in the town." It's a fact, I am.

'As soon as he hears the breakfast things, he must see Miss Oldfield. I must go out of the room. He must sit up and talk and talk till he drops down exhausted. Then he must ask for his letters; then he must send a telegram; then he must send me out of the room, fillin' it with cold air ten times an hour, to ask if that there Mr. Miles is here—who *is* that Mr. Miles? He's the worst of all. He hasn't a haporth o' mercy in him. He'll sit and sit, though I keep goin' and knockin' at the door;

and the poor, silly man will talk and talk to him, till, at last, he'll fairly drop all of a huddle into his pillows, and cough himself nearly to death. Then that Mr. Miles goes, and says to me at the door, as cool and fresh as white paint, "Nurse," he says, "Mr. Oldfield wants you. His cough is very bad just now." I should like to shake him like a bottle of medicine, that I should !

' Yes, out he goes, and in comes another draught of fresh air—no curtains 'ull keep it out—and as soon as the door's shut again, in comes poor Mr. George. He *does* come quietly, and asks *me*—he looks uncommon worn—if his father's any better.

' And now there's the fat little parson. I expect he'll come twice a day—a pest on him ! I say nothin' about the young lady

and her aunt, as would make as good nurses as needs be ! But what I *do* say is—taking 'em all together—flesh and blood can't stand it, let alone that poor, shattered body of his, that is nothin' now but skin and bones !'

That was the nurse's account very early in the morning, on the day after Mr. Sharely's arrival.

She said Mr. Oldfield was better. At that time, six o'clock, he may have been ; but, when the doctor came at ten, he was certainly a great deal worse than he had ever been—a change had taken place which the conscientious physician announced very plainly to Bell and Aunt Elsie.

Both lungs were now congested, and if the patient made any exertion, or did

anything but lie passively and submit to the most rigorous treatment, it would certainly go ill with him.

So much the doctor said plainly both to the patient and his friends, and Mr. Oldfield took notice. He nodded his head, asked no questions, and only followed Bell about the room with his eyes.

For the first time he seemed willingly to follow the only course by which he might recover. Perhaps it was an intense wish to save his life, now he fully realised the danger. Perhaps it was owing to the semi-torpid state of exhaustion which he was in. Whatever it was—for the first time Mr. Oldfield, that great, strong, restless man, now lay as passive as a feeble child, and rebelled at nothing.

The nurse went quietly about the doc-

tor's orders; and Bell confined herself mostly to sitting by the bed, silently wiping the great hot drops of perspiration from her father's face and hair, adjusting his pillow when he moved his head, and straightening the clothes, with unwearying patience, to exclude the cold, every time the patient turned. Sometimes he verily struggled for his breath, with convulsive energy. When he was not so distressed, he lay perfectly quiet, and his restlessness now was all involuntary.

He was as easy to manage as a child. He thanked Bell with his eyes many times, looking at her sometimes for a long spell with lingering fondness. Then he would close them, and seem to dream of what he had just seen, with a happy patient face. Bell had never seen her father so resigned

in her life. She, now and then, looked at him with a sorrowful, searching look, wondering if he were wholly conscious—she thought he was.

Once George came into the room on tip-toe, and was immediately going out again, Bell telling him, with a kind gesture and a wave of the hand, that all was going on well. They both thought their father was asleep, but he opened his eyes, and, seeing George there, he smiled ; then—his first and only offence—he put his hand out from under the bed-clothes for George to press.

George took it in silence and pressed it. He felt his own gently squeezed in return, and saw the smile—the quiet, kind smile his father gave him. A thrill as of fire shot through his heart. It made him

tremble. He loved his father more in that moment than he had ever loved him in his life—he felt nearer to him. He went out happier than he had been since Mr. Oldfield was taken ill.

That day seemed to afford a strange contrast to the previous day. Everything was so quiet. Maurice was away—he had had to go out of town for the day. The little clergyman did nothing but take lonely little walks, coming back every hour by the back-door, and creeping on tiptoe even along the hall, as if he had been a school-boy. Aunt Elsie gave him the news every time, and he did little but shake his head, or pretend to smile as the variations in her remarks affected him. Then he would creep out again under the impression that he was best out of the way.

He quite effaced himself, except in seeming to expect Aunt Elsie to report progress, when he would drink in her words and gaze into her face, with undisguised fondness.

At one o'clock the doctor came again, and brought with him a brother-physician. He said just what he had said in the morning, nothing more hopeful; but he was greatly satisfied with the nursing.

So the day began to wear away strangely, sadly, quietly. Indeed, it seemed to George very strange and very quiet. There was something in the air,—there was a change. The Elms was as sad as it could be; but it was peaceful. Yes, he felt peaceful himself. He was at peace with his father—for a day or two he had

felt rather resentful against him, he had had so much to say to Maurice.

‘He will pull through,’ said George to himself, when he had shut himself up in the breakfast-room, late in the afternoon, and lighted his pipe—the first pipe that day. ‘He will pull through it, if we can only keep him quiet. It’s a good thing Maurice is away. How can *he* feel what we feel? I hope he will keep away. He will pull through. He must pull through, now he is so quiet. He is always quieter when Maurice keeps away.’





CHAPTER XIV.

THE DREAD COMMISSION.



THAT evening, the doctor came again—by himself this time. It was his third visit that day. He stayed a long time, and when he left he shook his head ominously, and said he would call very early in the morning.

As the evening wore on, Mr. Oldfield again began to be restless. He asked Bell several times if Maurice had come back yet. Each time Bell said, ‘No,’ he fell

back on the pillow, with a look of disappointment.

‘What time is it?’ he asked, continually; and several times he propped himself up with his hands, leaning to one side of the bed, as if straining to hear something. He was listening for the sound of wheels. At about nine o’clock he turned to Aunt Elsie, who was sitting by his bed. Bell was downstairs with George.

‘Elsie,’ he said, in a very quiet voice, apparently free from pain.

‘Yes, Henry?’

‘I feel better; I feel less weight, and just now my brain seems clear; but still, I feel very strange.’

‘Well, you mustn’t talk, Henry.’

‘I *must* talk, Elsie—for a minute. I’ve made a mistake—I’ve put it off too long.

I feel very strange. I think I shall soon go to sleep—and I mightn't—I mightn't wake up again. Is George in ?'

'Yes.'

'Well, go and tell them—I'm . . .'

'No, no, Henry, not now; try to sleep. When you are better—to-morrow—not to-night—not to-night,' repeated Aunt Elsie, her colour coming and going, as she stood there looking down on the white, damp brow and sunken eyes of the prostrate man, and shaking her head.

'Go and tell them !' he repeated. 'I'm better just now, I can be left with nurse, and I'm sleepy. I might go to sleep, and I should like them to know. They must know before I die.'

A shrinking, pleading look came into

Aunt Elsie's face, but it only stayed a moment.

She had begun to demur: 'Oh! Henry, it will be very hard to tell them now—hard on them; and I would rather——'

Then she stopped. She caught a look in the sick man's face, and her own changed in an instant. In that moment little Mr. Sharely might have said truly she was a sweet woman, and like Bell's mother.

She smiled suddenly; she touched his hair with her light hand, and said in an altogether altered voice, the sweetest voice,

'Very well, Henry. I will go now; I will tell them everything. Try to sleep, dear, sleep if you can. You can trust me to tell them in the way you would like?'

‘Yes, Elsie, tell them—tell them in your own way. I am very weak, I ought not to have waited.’

‘You did it for the best, Henry. You’ve been a very good—a very good father. Now try to sleep, keep very quiet, and give over thinking. I’m going. Good-bye, Henry.’

‘Yes, yes, I’ll try ; it feels very strange. You can wake me. Be sure you wake me. Good-bye,—has Maurice come?’

‘Not yet,’ said Aunt Elsie, turning to give a smile at the door, and then noiselessly passing out.

When Aunt Elsie was out of the room, and had closed the door, her face changed again, the colour fled from it once more. She leaned on the bannister, pressing her

hands to her temples, and remained there for a minute.

In that minute she made a resolve, as she thought a wise one; it seemed to lessen the load on her mind, and she went downstairs with a white, calm, resolute face, but not a troubled one. She would first tell Bell alone!

Looking in the breakfast-room, she saw George sitting alone over the fire. He turned his head round, but did not speak.

‘Poor boy!’ she said, in her softest voice. ‘It’s very weary for you. You’ve nothing to do, and you can’t read. Lie on the couch and try to sleep, dear.’

George said he was not sleepy; and Aunt Elsie quietly closed the door, and went away without another word. Then she went to Bell.

‘Bell, my darling!’

‘Yes, aunt. Is papa asleep?’

‘He’s going to sleep, dear. He’s very quiet—he has sent me away. I am glad you are by yourself, dear.’

Bell looked up for an explanation.

‘I’ve something to tell you, my child. He has sent me to tell you now, something rather startling. No! no!’ as Bell darted a quick look at her aunt, ‘it is nothing to frighten you; only it is rather a strange story, it will sound very strange to you, though I have known it all your life. Come into my room, dear, no one will disturb us there; there is a good fire, and we can be all to ourselves. I think, Bell, you love me a good deal, and—and you won’t blame *me* for anything.’

Bell kissed her aunt, and looked very

calm, and not at all inquisitive, much less startled. She doubtless was thinking of the strange story Mr. Sharely had to tell her, and greatly relieved Aunt Elsie by her quiet demeanour.

‘Yes! I would rather have you all to myself, dear, just at first. But I have to tell George—unless you tell him—it would come better from you. He won’t be going out,—oh! no, it is nearly ten.’

Then Aunt Elsie put her arm round Bell’s waist, and they went softly up the stairs.

‘I think, dear aunt,’ Bell whispered, ‘I know what it is—it is about our money, and about Maurice’s?’

Aunt Elsie only pressed Bell closer to her—she did not speak. Thus they passed into Aunt Elsie’s room, and the door was closed.

It was closed almost without a sound, but not quite. Mr. Oldfield, who had been straining his ears to listen, as they ascended the stairs, heard the little click, and knew what it meant. The eager, listening look died out of his face. He turned over, gave one heavy sigh—so heavy that the nurse turned round to look at him—and then closed his eyes, as if he were going to sleep.





CHAPTER XV.

THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN.

GEORGE was sitting opposite the fire, dreamily staring at the dull red embers, when Bell and Aunt Elsie went up the stairs. Then it was a quarter to ten.

So he remained, without a book, without a paper, without anything with which he might pretend even to divert his thoughts. He sat staring into the fire—moving no more perceptibly than the hour-

hand on the dial straight before his face, which was now pointing to eleven.

George had not heard that clock strike ten ; he might not have heard it strike eleven ; but simultaneously with that little silvery chime came the sound of footsteps in the hall. They were not less familiar to George than the chimes of that old clock, which he had heard thousands of times. They were not less familiar, but they were far less musical.

He started up, pushed his chair back impatiently, said, ‘ Confound him ! Eleven o’clock ! ’ and threw open the door.

‘ Ah ! it’s you, Maurice, — come in ! Father is no better, but he’s now very quiet. He’s *begun*, at last, to be quiet, and to get some sleep. Have you had a good day ? Come in and sit down.’

Now Maurice, it must be stated, had come in by the side-door, which was seldom fastened, as he generally did. He had not taken off his overcoat ; but he had hung his hat on the hat-stand, and was approaching the stairs, close to the breakfast-room, when George accosted him. He had evidently been going straight upstairs. If George had seen this, and it may be presumed he had, he had affected *not* to see it.

‘ Ah !’ said Maurice, ‘ then he’s about the same. These things will have their time—they will have their time. We must be patient. Yes, I’ve had a pretty good day, thank you, George ; but I’m tired.’

‘ Well, come and sit down. Will you have a cigar ?’

‘ No, thanks, I won’t stay—I’m tired.

I'll just go up and have a look, and then I'll be off. Is Bell there ?'

'Look here, Maurice,' George answered, not quite in his natural voice, as he stepped out of the room and stood on the mat at the foot of the stairs, 'you'd better not go up to-night. In fact, you—you mustn't. I think my father's asleep. At any rate, he is quiet, and must be kept so at any cost. I've only seen him once myself to-day. The doctor says he must *not* talk.'

While George was making these natural observations, he was fronting Maurice, with his back to the stairs ; and, though his voice and his face were as calm as he could keep them, his manner just perceptibly betrayed that he had taken that position advisedly. He knew Maurice,

and he had no intention of letting him say, 'Pooh! pooh!' and then go up before he could stop him.

Maurice seemed to realise the position, too; his eyebrows moved, and the faintest sneer played for a moment under his long, drooping moustache.

'That's right—that's wise. Keep him quiet before everything. But you don't think, you foolish boy, that *I* should disturb him. He's as used to me as he is to the nurse—or to Bell herself, for that matter!'

And with that, a speech of which the last words were not calculated to smooth his way with George, Maurice approached a step nearer—in fact, he approached as near to the stairs as he could, while George remained where he was.

‘That may be so, Maurice,’—George was not now speaking so calmly,—‘but you must excuse me, my father’s life is in danger. Don’t I tell you I’ve only seen him once myself all this day? He is not to talk, and he shan’t talk. You mustn’t think of going up to-night.’

‘But I must think of it, and *shall* do it,’ said Maurice, now icily calm, while George was growing hot. ‘Do you know I have very serious business on my hands for Mr. Oldfield? Do you know——?’

‘Oh, damn your business!’ cried the young man, his control gone. ‘You’ve a great deal too much business. You’d “business” him to death. You nearly have done so while he’s been in bed. Now it’s no good, so come away. You make me mad!’

‘It seems so,’—his voice had even more ice in it,—‘mad in more senses than one. But just tell me—do you mean to say you won’t *let* me go up?’

‘Yes!’ said George. ‘I do,’ the fire in him coming out in proportion to the ice in Maurice. ‘And, so far as I can hinder it, you shan’t go until my father is very much better. Everybody in the house knows that you’re talking him into his grave; the very servants say he hasn’t a chance, and what the devil does it matter to you?—what do *you* care?’

The man thus spoken to—spoken to, as he had never dreamed he could be spoken to, by the young man before him—for some seconds stood motionless, his cheeks pallid, his lip curling, his eyes flashing. George had never seen those eyes flash

before. For some seconds he stood thus, and then strangely, very strangely, he burst into a laugh.

‘You damned young fool! get out of the way! You are going mad, in reality, for want of sleep. If you must know, I *have* to see Mr. Oldfield to-night, and he has to see me. Will *that* do for you?’

‘No! it won’t,’ said George, now with a sham calmness, almost as imposing as the real thing. ‘You’ve come over me too much with your “wills” and “musts.” You *have* to see him?—well! you *won’t* see him, until he sends for you. You’ve seen him a sight too much. See *you!* hear *you!* be guided by *you!* it’s *all you!* I wish to heaven he had never known you at all. But I’ll stand it no longer; I’ll let you know, when my father’s powerless, I’m

the master here. You've been the master a little too long, and a lot too much !'

Maurice Miles stood exactly as he stood before, only his brow was darker, his cheeks more livid, his eyes now blazing, rather than flashing ; and this time he did not burst into a laugh. He came a step nearer, he put his hand on the banister, he almost touched George. George clenched his fist.

'You are not coming, Miles, I've told you !'

Maurice Miles pressed on, and George took one step backward. He stood now almost a foot higher than his opponent.

'I'll strike, Miles ! upon my soul, I'll knock you down !'

Maurice Miles's face had not changed

and he had not spoken a word. He now put one foot on the stairs, grasped the banister with a firmer grasp, and forced himself on to the first step.

It was a physical struggle, but they did not lock their arms. George Oldfield yielded, took the next step backward, drew back his fist, and struck.

Maurice Miles might have thought, if he had looked at George, that the blow would fall on his face. Reflection, compunction, reason, there was no trace of in his face. There was only determination, blind determination, blent with hatred. But the blow was launched at his Maurice's chest.

Partly struck, partly thrust with terrible violence, he staggered back into the hall. Back he went, tottering with his arms out,

for half-a-dozen yards ; and then he would have fallen, but his course took him towards one of the columns of the archway under the lamp. He grasped it, saved the fall, steadied himself, and then . . . then there followed a moment that was absolutely awful.

Maurice Miles now was not calm, he was raging. He was no longer livid, he was purple. His hands were clenched, his whole frame was quivering, his face was distorted. It was the first time George had seen that handsome man wholly beyond self-control. It was the first time he had seen him hideous.

Such he was, as he looked at the man who had struck him. Such he was as he sprang towards him, for he *did* spring towards him, like a wild animal. He reached

him with his fist forward, and then—miracle of miracles—he stopped dead short !

He seemed to have some kind of a fit. His whole frame was convulsed. He was casting out Beelzebub by the aid of Beelzebub. He unclenched his hands, his muscles relaxed, the hideousness went out of his face. He put his hand in his pocket, and took out a pencil, then a pocket-book, and began to write. He wrote for ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds, without looking up. Then he shut up the book, drew the elastic round it, put it in his pocket, and looked—his own calm, inscrutable, sphinx-like self again—into George Oldfield's face.

‘I will show you *that* at some future time,’ he said. ‘You will rue what you have

done to the day of your death, and there may be those who will rue it afterwards. I have saved myself, but if there had not been one man upstairs near to death, there would have been another down here much nearer. I will wait now till Mr. Oldfield asks for me.'

'Maurice!' cried George, who had been waiting on the defensive with his fists ready, without fear, but without any hope that the deadly struggle could be averted—
'Maurice! I'm sorry, I'm sorry; but you did it yourself, I couldn't help it. You forced me to do it—I did it to save my father's life—and—and——' stammered George, still hot and panting with excitement, but without any menace in his voice, 'I'd do it again.'

'I have said all I have to say,' Mr. Miles

answered. 'I will show you what I have written, some day. You will rue what you've done.'

When he had said that, or while he was saying it, he walked towards the hat-stand. George did not speak.

Maurice put his hat on—then he took it off again, and stood as if uncertain what to do. George had never once before seen Maurice uncertain what to do. Presently he hung his hat up again, and turned round.

'You will rue it. We shall have to strike the balance; but Bell need not know. *I* shall not tell her; it will rest with you.'

'But I *shall* tell her,' said George. 'What! you'll have your revenge——' At

this moment a door creaked upstairs, and a light foot sounded on the stairs, but George did not stop. 'You'll have your revenge! You'll make me pay for it—Damn you! you perhaps think you'll strike at me *through* Bell? I need not tell Bell indeed! It rests with *me*! You're a cool hand, Maurice Miles, but——'

George stopped suddenly, arrested as much by the statuesque attitude of the man he spoke to, who was now smiling up the stairs with one hand in his pocket, as by the sound, which he now could not help hearing, close behind him. It was Bell!

Could those men have seen her—could George have seen her, as she was when she came out of Aunt Elsie's room—as she

was, on the stairs, before she turned the corner and saw into the hall, her reception might have been different.

It might have been, for she was a sight to soften the most angry mood—to subdue the hottest anger. Ethereal as a spirit, she moved as if in a dream; her face was as quiet as death—as death at its loveliest—but her eyes were open—wide open, wistful, wonderful, with a filmy beauty.

She had been crying; but the tears had not been bitter, nor left the eyelids red. Her lips were a little open, and the rich colour, which seemed to have fled there from the other parts of her face, showed out, beneath her mild, deep violet eyes, like a soft streak of the carmine sun itself on the carmine-tinted snow.

Yes, she was like a spirit from the realm

of spirits—tried, proved, blessed—floating down again with some mission into a wicked world ; as was indeed the case.

If Bell might be likened to a tried and blessed spirit at the top of the stairs, she became a very woman before she was at the bottom.

George's hot words smote on her ears with a deadly effect. When she saw the two men in the hall, and still heard George's words, now she was close behind him, and nearly touched him, she stood transfixed.

'George!' she cried, 'what are you saying? Stop! stop! You have not quarrelled—not yet, not yet! I'm in time to stop you.'

'We *have* quarrelled,' said George, making room for his sister to pass, and

following her into the breakfast-room, whither Maurice had already quietly retreated, with a signalled invitation for Bell to follow.

‘But it isn’t serious—it’s only a word? It was only a word, Maurice?’

When Maurice Miles had entered the room, though he had signalled Bell to follow him, he had planted himself on the hearthrug, his elbows on the mantel-piece, and his head in his hands. There he remained, his back to the room and everything in it. He did not answer Bell’s question; he did not just then turn round. Bell turned her appealing eyes to George.

‘What is it, George? what have you said? Do speak—one of you! Oh, that you should have quarrelled now—this very

night, and never quarrelled before ! What was it about, George ?

‘ Well, Bell, if you want to know, it was simply this :—Maurice was determined he would go upstairs, and talk to father, and I was determined he shouldn’t. It didn’t matter what might follow ; it didn’t matter what the doctor had said ; it didn’t matter if it cost father his life, Maurice *would* have his way, as he always has had. I stood at the bottom of the stairs ; he tried to force his way up, and—and I knocked him down, or tried to ; and, under the same circumstances, I’d do it again. There ! that’s all. I’ve borne it as long as a man *could* bear it. I’ve tried my best—I’ve tried, for your sake ; but it’s all over—it’s all over, Bell—I——’

‘ Oh ! George, George, you don’t know

what you've done ; he had a right to go. Maurice's talking would have done no harm. But how could George tell, Maurice? He didn't know; *I've* only known for an hour. I came down just now to tell him. Oh, it's cruel—cruel ! You've both been cruel. Why don't you shake hands? Why don't you make it up? It was all in a passion, and you are killing me! You have never quarrelled before, and now, at the last moment, when it could never have happened after—— You are killing me between you ; you are breaking my heart !'

Then Bell sank into a chair, buried her face in her hands, and cried.

Maurice Miles had turned round, and was looking at her with questioning eyes,

and George was staring, dazed and incredulous.

‘What do you mean, Bell? Why don’t you speak out?’ he said.

And Maurice asked, quietly, ‘Who has told you?’

‘Aunt Elsie,’ sobbed Bell, ‘an hour ago—only an hour. I was coming down to tell George. I thought the last hour of your estrangement had come, that you would now be the greatest friends. I’ve been frightened many a time—frightened of this; and now it has come—the worst that could happen. Come at the last moment. You’ll kill me between you. Oh, if I had only come down half-an-hour ago!’

Bell sobbed out this, without raising her head; then for a moment she did raise

it. Her sobbing stopped; a little tremor of anger ran through her voice as she turned her eyes on Maurice.

‘*You* knew it,’ she cried, ‘and George did not know. He only thought of—of—Oh, you might have spared me!’

‘I *did* spare you,’ said Maurice. ‘I wanted to spare you. I told George that you need not know anything about it.’

‘Yes, he did, Bell. It’s true. He was very considerate. He was willing that you should be his wife; and meanwhile, he swore he would take a revenge on me that would last through my life and afterwards—possibly on my children. Maurice is far-sighted. This exquisite torture was to be inflicted through you. Probably I was to be denied the pleasure of ever see-

ing you. God knows! I've stood a lot, Bell. I've kept my word. I'm sorry—I'm more sorry than I can ever show you for what has happened; but I think, now, it's about come to this, Bell, you'll have to choose between Maurice and me.'

While George was saying all this, the colour was coming and going in Bell's face. The hint, reasonable or unreasonable, that Maurice intended to alienate her from George—to hit at him in any way through *her*—told palpably. Her looks (and some of them were very expressive) showed plainly to which side her heart was veering; and if she had had to choose that second between lover and brother, it would have been the brother—a child could have seen that.

She was going to say something—perhaps something very unwise—when Maurice prevented her. He spoke with his old calmness, and without any trace of a sneer. He had either relented very much, and knew something of the divine joys of forgiveness, or was a very cunning and dangerous man.

‘You are stating things very unfairly, George. I said you would suffer for it, and you will suffer for it to the last day of your life, you will suffer bitterly when you wake up to-morrow morning. I won’t say any more, Bell; I won’t defend myself further to you. I will go now. Perhaps you will go to the door with me; and the next time I come—when you and George have talked—perhaps he will look on things in a different light.’

George said nothing, and Maurice was walking out of the room. But Bell jumped up.

‘Oh! stay a minute, stay another minute. Won’t you be friends? won’t you shake hands now? It was all in passion, and you were both wrong.’

The men looked at each other, Bell between them, looking pleadingly, in turns, at both.

Maurice was about to speak. Heaven only, and his own strange deep inscrutable soul, knew what he was about to say, but he never *did* say it.

A bell in the kitchen began to ring violently. Bell knew the sound of it, knew which it was—it was Mr. Oldfield’s bedroom bell. It was rung violently and spasmodically; and went on ringing without

any intermission, it seemed interminably.

The two men looked at each other, startled but speechless, as they heard Bell and one of the servants flying up the stairs.

Another moment, and George stood listening below, apprehensive of some sudden calamity. He heard a door opened. Aunt Elsie came out. He heard a little cry from his sister. Then Mr. Oldfield's door was opened, and still the bell went jingling, jangling, more frantically than ever. It was the nurse, they thought, who was ringing it in a state of panic.

Maurice now came to the foot of the stairs. The two men looked at each other again, but this time only with fearful inquiries. There was no question of right of way, and no menaces.

‘My father!’ whispered George, with white lips.

Thus they stood straining their ears as Mr. Oldfield’s door opened. Then came a hubbub and a buzz of many voices; and a second later, there came a cry from the door, tremulous, clear, and piercing. It was Aunt Elsie.

‘Maurice! Maurice!’

George started, staring strangely at the man beside him, who now went hurriedly, but quietly, up the stairs.

He had not ascended the first flight, when another cry, clear and piercing, rang through the house.

It was Bell coming down, calling, ‘Maurice! Maurice!’

They met on the stairs, and Bell did not

stop. She only gave him one anguished look ; then, rushing forward, she threw her arms round her brother's neck, and clung to him with a wild tenacity.

‘ Oh, my darling, he’s dying—he’s dying!’

George looked at her, like a man whose heart and brain had been clogged with lead, obtuse, dumb, nerveless. That cry of ‘ Maurice! Maurice!’ was still in his ears, and his eyes were looking blankly up the stairs. Then he made an involuntary movement to free himself, as if he would follow ; but his sister clung to him even closer.

‘ One moment, one moment ; oh, my darling, how will you bear it ? He wants Maurice, because—oh, he wronged him ; he disowned him ; he was cruel to him.

He is only our step-father, and Maurice— Maurice is his only son !'

'How will you bear it?' Bell had asked. One might have thought, looking at George Oldfield just then, he could have borne anything. Feeling was stunned—reflection was dormant. One might have thought that another blow after all that had come that night, let it be what it would, could hardly move him ; but it was not so.

When Bell had faltered out those strange words, hiding her face on his breast, he fell out of her arms, staggered blindly, and would have fallen heavily backward, like a drunken man, had she not caught him.

The love of a sister is not as the love of a wife. We are told it is as the pallid moon beam, to the throbbing, burning sunlight. We are told it is incomplete, incapable of an

effusion, that can transform existence. It may be so. The psychological analyst doubtless knows the exact values of sexual passion and unsensuous adoration, in their respective achievements of devotion. But common mortals only know what love is, as they feel it and see it. A common mortal would have said, at that moment, that no human love was stronger than Bell's for her brother George.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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